

A photograph of a bird, possibly a flycatcher, with a vibrant red head and neck, and a body with horizontal brown and white stripes. The bird is perched on a thin, dark branch, facing left. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green, suggesting foliage. The overall image has a slightly grainy, artistic quality.

RANJIT LAL

Birds

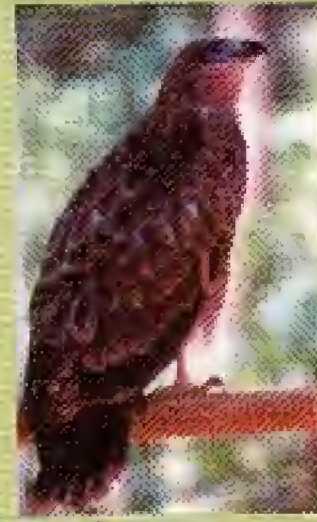
from my window



TREE PIE



BRAHMINY KITE



PARIAH KITE



RING DOVE



GREEN PIGEONS



REDWHISKERED BULBUL



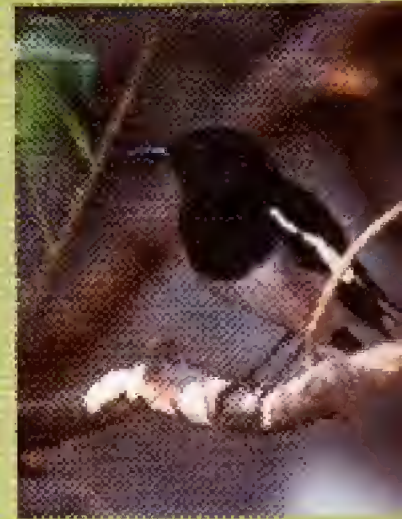
COMMON BABBLER



TAILORBIRD



ASHY WREN-WARBLER



MAGPIE ROBIN



BRAHMINY MYNA



PIED MYNA



LITTLE BROWN DOVES



WHITE-EARED BULBUL



REDVENTED BULBUL



BLOSSOMHEADED
PARAKEETS



JUNGLE BABBLERS



WHITE-EYE



CRIMSON SUNBIRD



PURPLE SUNBIRD





Birds from my window

RANJIT LAL



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sometimes, even keen birdwatchers can become lazy, especially where everyday birds are concerned. You sort of shrug your shoulders and say, "So what? The birds will always be there! I'd rather roll in bed now and look at them another day." Which of course, you never do.

Well, that began to happen to me too, so I have to thank my friend (and doctor) Dr Sudhir Oswal, for making sure it didn't. He began telling me about all the exciting birds he had been seeing in the neighbourhood while on his early morning walks, which made me sit up and take note. There seemed to be a hell of a lot going on, which I was missing. It was through him, for example, that I was introduced to the lovely barn owl family in Qudsia Gardens and learnt of their story.

And then of course, I have to thank all those birds who have so often visited the 'mitha neem' and bottlebrush trees outside my window and made this book possible — even while distracting me no end while I was writing it.

Birds From My Window (English)

First published in India, 2002

ISBN 81-86895-64-7

Rs 100.00

© text and colour pictures Ranjit Lal

© Ranjit Lal: sketches on pages 7, 10, 12, 13, 15, 17, 18 (top), 21, 22, 23, 26 (top), 27 (bottom), 28, 29, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 39, 42, 43, 45, 46, 51, 52, 55, 58, 59, 63, 64, 67, 69.

© Tulika Publishers: sketches on pages 9, 18 (bottom), 19, 20, 24, 25, 26 (bottom), 27 (top), 40, 41, 44, 47, 48, 49, 61, 62. These were rendered by Divya Saxena as part of her Graphic Design student project for NID, Ahmedabad.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means — graphic, electronic or mechanical — without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Published by

Tulika Publishers, 13 Prithvi Avenue, Abhiramapuram, Chennai 600 018, India

email kaka@tulikabooks.com & tulbooks@md4.vsnl.net.in

website www.tulikabooks.com

Distributed by

Goodbooks Marketing Pvt. Ltd, 76 Fourth Street, Abhiramapuram, Chennai 600 018, India

email goodbuks@vsnl.com *website* www.goodbooksindia.com

Printed and bound at

Anjan International Media, 11 Greenways Road, Raja Annamalaipuram, Chennai 600 028, India

C O N T E N T S

Introduction **5**

A Houseful of Sparrows **7**

Of Hang-gliding Crows and Thocolate Tree Pies **10**

Flying Kites **13**

Myna Birds with Major Attitude **15**

Quarrelsome Birds of Peace: Pigeons and Doves **18**

Three Cheers for Bulbuls **21**

Talking about Parrots **23**

Those Untidy Jungli Babblers **25**

Tales of Two Tiny Tots: the Tailorbird and Ashy Wren-Warbler **27**

The Maestro of Las Palmas: the Magpie Robin **29**

Jingling Flowerbirds: White-eyes **31**

Jewelbirds of the Sun: Glittering Sunbirds **32**

Funny Birds of Summer: Coppersmiths and Barbets **34**

Firework in the Swimming Pool: the Whitebreasted Kingfisher **36**

One Tough Nut: the Goldenbacked Woodpecker **37**

The Baby Stinkbombers: Hoopoes **39**

Cuckoos All! **40**

Do Bee-eaters Eat Bees? **44**

Those Charming Ugly Ducklings: Grey Hornbills **45**

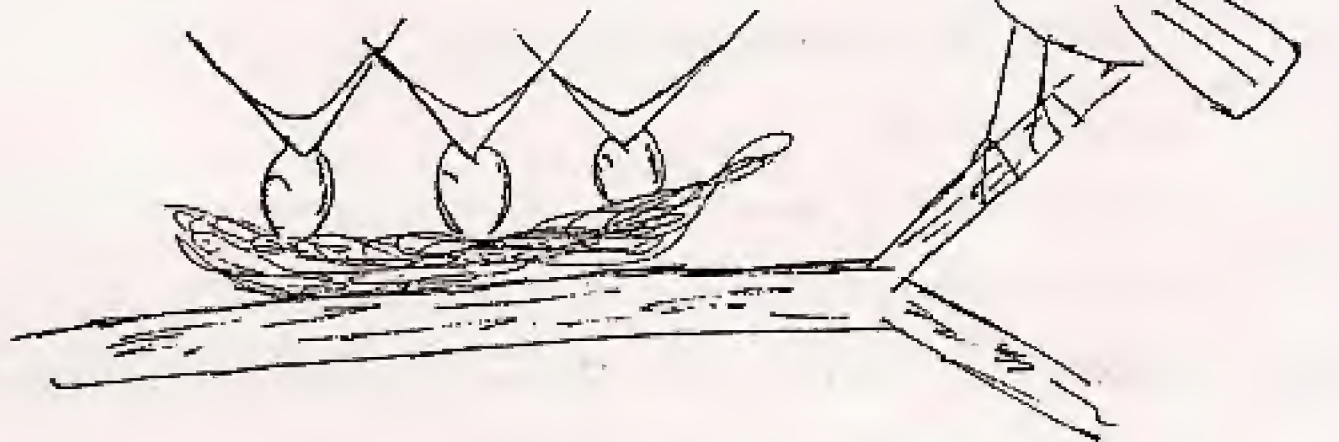
BHRR! YAA! THUDD! OOF! Welcome to the Grey Partridge **47**

Dancers in the Cemetery: Peafowl **48**

The Bird that Welcomed Me to Delhi: the Black Redstart 50
Wiggle-Waggle's First Big Flight: the White Wagtail 52
Tea Garden Tales of Paradise: Paradise Flycatchers 55
Dusky Mountain Songster: the Streaked Laughing Thrush 58
Exotic Mountain Surprise: the Redbilled Leiothrix 59
Ambush at the Swimming Pool: the Shikra Strikes 61
The Fall of an Eagle 62
The Barn Owls of Qudsia Gardens 64
Keeping Watch from the Headless Palm: the Spotted Owlet 67
Stratocruisers in Danger: Vultures 69
Last Look from the Window 71

"PRAWN COCKTAIL FOLLOWED BY CHICKEN A LA KING,
POTATOES IN THEIR JACKETS, FRESH GREEN
PEAS, WALDORF SALAD AND BAKED
ALASKA FOR DESSERT — QUICKLY PLEASE!"

THIS BOOK IS FOR
ABHISHEK, DIVYA AND KABIR



R Lal

Introduction

Can you meet colourful, interesting and beautiful birds if you live in a big, noisy, dirty, crowded city like Mumbai or Kolkata or Delhi or Chennai or Bangalore or any such? Birds, apart from crows, sparrows, pigeons and kites of course, which are not exactly beautiful, and something of a nuisance.

Well, I live in Delhi, and these days — it is early summer — the first thing I am likely to see when I open my eyes in the morning is a large and gorgeous peacock, perched on the bare limbs of a laburnum tree in the cemetery next door. He is usually poised to take off, and will soon fly up to the terrace and then down into the big lawn on the opposite side of the house. Here, his harem of seven or eight peahens is probably already waiting for him. He will flamboyantly land in their midst and begin to dance for them, though when he does so, they will behave as if they are not in the least interested in his performance.

In March, the bottlebrush in the small front garden blooms and a whole lot of birds come visiting throughout the day. These include bulbuls, mynas, babblers, parakeets, sunbirds and white-eyes. They're attracted by the nectar of the fuzzy scarlet flowers and the insects which hum around them.

My bedroom overlooks an old historical cemetery, which some people think is pretty dreadful — how can you like living next to the dead? they ask. Anyway, you would imagine I would have quiet neighbours — apart from the odd screeching banshee, of course. Well, no screeching banshees, but no quiet neighbours either. For this is where the peacocks live, and as the monsoons approach, take to duelling with each other like noblemen of yore. That apart, when alarmed, they honk and shriek worse than any banshee — especially when they choose to do so in chorus in the middle of the night! This is where the koels hatch their bubbling hysterical conspiracies in order to trick the crows, who of course, strut around like big-dada mafia boss birds until they get diddled and have to bring up hordes of screaming koel brats! This is where groups of jaunty grey partridges scream, 'pateela! pateela! pateela!'

as they set out for their early morning walks amongst the tombstones. This is where migratory black kites — 500 or more — roost every evening in the big tamarind trees in winter. This is where grey hornbills bring their girlfriends and offer them neem berries as though they were emeralds. I could go on and on.

Of course I don't stay in Delhi all the time and occasionally go off to nearby hill stations in the Himalayas, and to Goa for holidays. And in these places, meet new bird neighbours, again often by simply looking out of the window or sitting out in the balcony.

The thing is, you don't have to go tramping off into the wilderness in order to see birds (though you must never lose the chance to do so). I've made a list of over 50 species that I've seen from my bedroom balcony alone and in this book you'll meet some of them.

Don't despair if you live in an area which has just a few trees and very little greenery — and no cemetery! Any tree or bush or hedge or shrub that has nectar-yielding flowers or sweet fruit or berries, is sure to be a hangout for birds. As will be the nearest park. Even your school playground, if it has trees, would be a good place.

As for 'ordinary' birds — sparrows, crows, pigeons, kites and the like — well, they can be very interesting characters indeed. They're so used to our presence that they usually carry on with their lives as though we did not exist. Some, of course, move in with us, and make a mess in our houses — and don't pay any rent either!

I've been watching birds from my window and balcony for many years now and have found it's a wonderful way of never having to get bored. Because out there, in the world of birds, something always seems to be happening. Right now, for instance, I know there's a cat on the prowl somewhere nearby because mynas are heckling and screeching loudly, and calling up a backup mob of bulbuls, babblers, sparrows, and other mynas to help drive it away. A tailorbird, flicking its tail excitedly, is shouting encouragement to them from the bougainvillea on the balcony like a tiny-tot cheerleader.

Actually so much happens every day that I've had to place my writing desk facing the wall. Because if it faced the window, I'd be staring out of it all the time and this book would never have been written.



A houseful of sparrows



house sparrow

There was a handsome young sparrow,
Who thought he could fly like an arrow,
Through fan blades that flashed,
But alack and alas,
The gap between them was too narrow!

We have all probably had SPARROWS nesting in our homes at some time or the other and they can be quite noisy and messy tenants. When I lived in Mumbai many years ago, a pair of sparrows had built their straw-and-rags nest on top of the ceiling fan and I thought, my God, what kind of parents are they going to be!

Just imagine: You're a sparrow fledgling who, so far, has been raised pretty comfortably in a flat in Mumbai, well sheltered from the elements. Now at last, quivering with excitement and nervousness, you're ready for your first flight. Will you be able to make it or will you crash ignominiously to the ground? You perch at the edge of your home and look down. And your heart falls down a deep dark well. For there, just inches below you, are three colossal steel blades whooshing round and round so fast they make you dizzy.

Okay, you tell yourself, be calm. Yes, this is Mumbai, one tough city where the competition is truly, well, cut-throat. So there is a lot of pressure on your parents to ensure that you can take the toughest of challenges. That is why they've built their home in this terrifying place and want you to fly through those deadly flashing blades. (The sparrow equivalent of entrance tests to schools and colleges!) If you succeed in getting through unscathed, well, you're ready for anything. And hell, your parents have been flying through those blades god knows how many times a day in order to feed you and your siblings. Ah, now that's an idea — maybe your kid sister should go first . . .

I don't know what baby sparrows or their parents really think, of course, but it's still a pretty stupid place to build a nest and we had to dismantle it after one of the parent birds got killed by the fan. (One brood had left home, a second was probably on its way.)

Two sparrow families nest at either end of my small balcony — and they're forever squabbling with each other. A few years ago, war broke out between the two clans.

According to the notes I made at the time, it seems that the trouble began when one of the females suddenly took a great fancy to the handsome gentleman next door who, with his black waistcoat and shiny chestnut plumage, would strut around cockily, showing off. Of course, handsome gent's wife did not at all approve of the attention being paid to her husband by their neighbour, and the two ladies went for each other hammer and tongs. Both of them would cuddle up to handsome gent — one on either side of him — and shrilly hurl curses at each other over his head. Alarmed (and deafened), he would fly off into the nearby bottlebrush tree, followed by his wife scolding him shrilly all the while (and brandishing an imaginary saucepan). The second lady would then vent her rage on the couple's nest and throw a right royal tantrum. Fluttering angrily, she would pull out the straw and stuffing and scatter the feathers used as lining everywhere — making a mess on the balcony floor. I couldn't help wondering if handsome gent had made her all kinds of prince-like promises (to marry her and so forth) which he now could not keep.

Alas, one thing led to another, and now tantrum lady's husband got into the act, probably suspecting that handsome gent next door had been making eyes at his wife. One morning I found both gentlemen on the balcony floor, lying on their sides, facing each other chin to chin, glaring murderously into each other's beady little eyes, their claws enmeshed. I had to quickly shut the door lest my labrador Wag pounced on them and gobbled them up. (Not that they would have noticed.) They fought like that from 11.30 a.m. to 2.30 p.m., and I think their wives got involved too because there was a battered bleeding lady looking very sorry for herself on the bougainvillea bush that evening. I don't know exactly who won that fight — I think it must have been a draw, because hostilities continued for a week or so before matters calmed down.

On another occasion, I was roused from my slumber on a hot Sunday afternoon by a plaintive but persistent cheeping coming from somewhere inside my bedroom. A search revealed a fledgling sparrow in one corner, trying valiantly to walk through the closet door. Its feathers had just begun to sprout and it squatted in my palm looking lost and woebegone. I placed it in a shoebox and put the shoebox on the cooler in the balcony, just beneath the nest it had obviously fallen out of. I was happy to see — contrary to what most people believe — that its parents immediately resumed feeding it in the box. I was greatly relieved too, because I'm not very good at catching hundreds of tiny caterpillars which is what baby sparrows eat. Sadly however, the fledgling died after two days — perhaps it had been injured during its fall from the nest.

HOUSE SPARROWS are tough city birds and have adjusted to the bustle and noise of big cities perfectly — being as noisy and pushy as big-city dwellers themselves are. They've



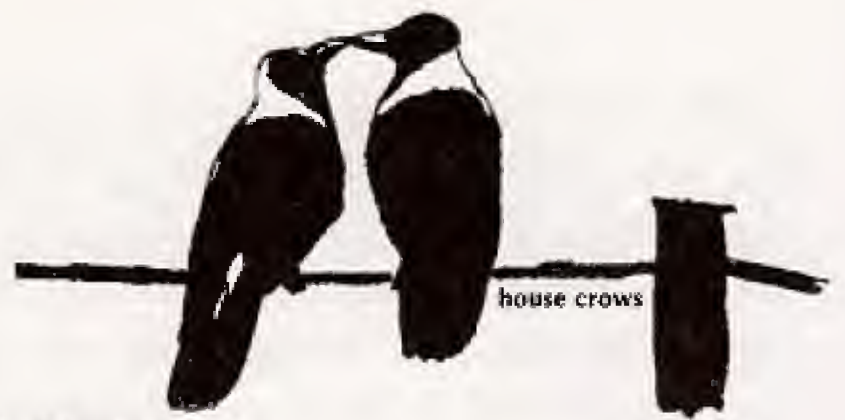
settled in cities all over the world, including London, New York, Paris, Rome . . . They have never really trusted human beings, wisely so, and are the first to whirr off at the slightest signs of trouble. Apart from stuffing their messy nests into holes and crevices just about anywhere, they sometimes construct untidy globular nests in trees — like a pair has done on a silver birch tree in the garden. This particular nest is right next door to the huge twiggy edifice of a pair of pariah kites, which means that probably kites do not always eat baby sparrows! In fact, the sparrows get protection from the kites who will not tolerate crows or cats near their tree.

Sparrows are basically seed-eaters but now, being used to big-city life, will take on just about anything vegetarian. And even when calm and unstressed, their hearts beat a thousand times a minute.

On my holiday trips to the Himalayas, I have seen CINNAMON or RUSSET SPARROWS, which appear to be quieter and gentler than the cheeky house sparrows. Their plumage is more caramel coloured than chestnut. They would fly into the garden in small groups, cling to stalks of wild grass and pick off the seeds. I would imagine that house sparrows from big cities would regard them as being simpletons . . . Ah, now yet another noisy quarrel has broken out in the balcony and I must go and see what it's all about . . .

HOUSE SPARROWS found all over India **NEST** throughout the year **LAY** 3-6 eggs **BOTH PARENTS** rear the chicks





Of hang-gliding crows and thocolate tree pies



jungle crow

"We're the smartest and best and all that,"
Said the crow who was having a chat.
"Good!" smiled the black koel,
"Then you will be able
To feed and raise all my brats!"

HOUSE CROWS are probably the most unpopular of all birds and I wonder if this is because they are almost as clever, cunning, cheeky and inquisitive as we are. They know exactly when you're about to let fly with your catapult and dodge easily away with a scornful 'kaaww!'.

With their glittering black eyes and sly sideways hops and nonchalant shuffles, crows get the better of most birds and people. I used to watch them at the swimming pool area of the posh Willingdon Club in Mumbai where they used to filch melba toast, wafers and waffles from right under the noses of the members. You could wave your arms and yell and they'd hop just out of reach and wait for you to get distracted or feel foolish, before helping themselves.

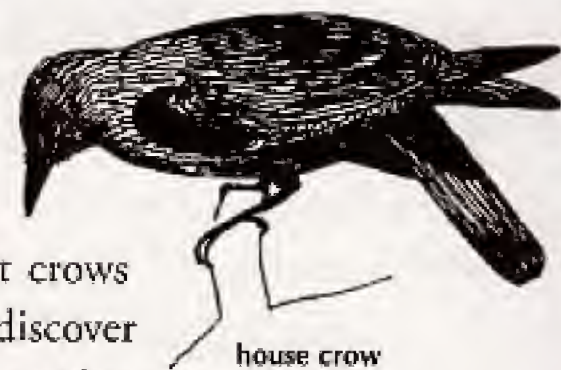
Actually, the only thing I really dislike about crows is their horrible habit of mercilessly destroying the nests, and eating the eggs and chicks of other birds. And now, there are so many of them in big cities that they're driving away other more sensitive birds. But they're useful all the same, and clean up the rubbish we throw in the streets with more efficiency than the municipality's sanitation department.

While house crows wear an ash grey collar as a badge of identification, **JUNGLE CROWS** — or **LARBEBILLED CROWS** as they are now called — are larger and dressed entirely in glossy



black and have huge, fearsome-looking bills. Also, they're not as common in towns.

Both house crows and jungle crows enjoy making fools of other birds and animals. I've seen house crows take great delight in pulling the tail feathers of other, often larger birds, and jungle crows completely upsetting the grave dignity and majesty of a magnificent tawny eagle in flight. Most crows hate raptors and owls and will make a huge racket when they discover one and try and drive it from the area. Whenever I hear crows cawing in unison and flying around agitatedly in the cemetery next door, I know that they have found either an owl or a raptor, and hope it might be the magnificent crested serpent eagle that comes visiting once or twice a year.



You'll have no doubt that crows have a great sense of fun and daredevilry when you see them pit their flying skills against a stiff wind blowing off the face of a cliff or even a skyscraper. They'll balance themselves against the wind, wing-tips fluttering and then whistle into a steep, suicidal looking dive before pulling up, looping-the-loop and then balancing perfectly again like expert hang-gliders. I used to watch Himalayan jungle crows float off the mountainside in Kasauli and do aerobatics, croaking hoarsely at each other with sheer pleasure. Often they would tumble down-down-down, rolling over and over and looking completely out of control and about to crash, before suddenly swooping up again in perfect control. They were masters of the mountain winds. Here in Delhi, I watch them fly alongside and perch effortlessly on clattering garbage trucks, helping themselves to titbits as they do so. Talk about meals-on-wheels!

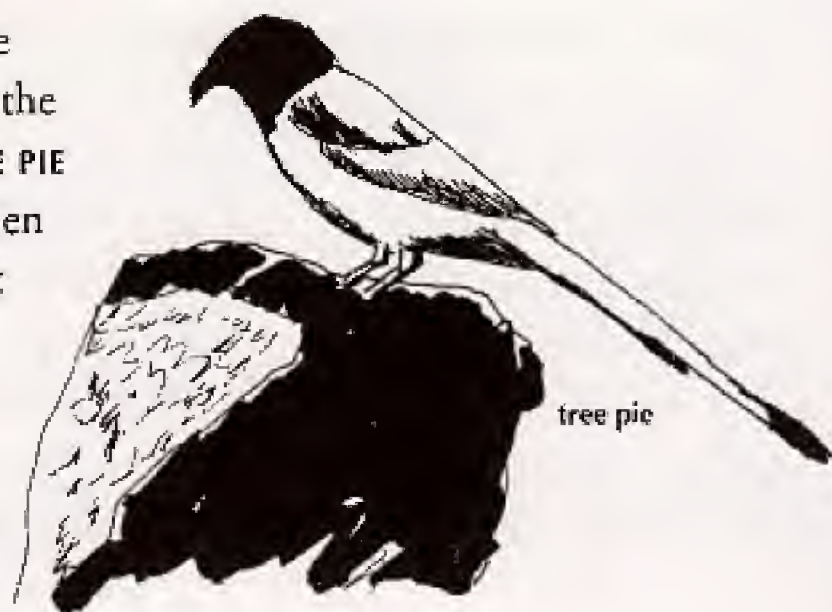
Crows are not fussy about what they eat. They rear their young every summer, in comfortable twiggy nests up in leafy trees. Crows are very clan-minded birds, and when one of them dies, all the crows in the neighbourhood will arrive and jointly and loudly hold a remembrance service for the departed soul.

Smart as they may be, both house and jungle crows get diddled by those wily koels who lay their eggs in their nests and leave it to the crows to raise their young. In one case, as many as nine koel eggs were found in the nest of an exceptionally dumb jungle crow — in addition to four belonging to the rightful owner.

Have you ever heard of a bird that asks for 'thocolate'? Well, if you listen carefully, you'll discover that the **TREE PIE** does. Also a member of the crow tribe, the tree pie is smartly turned out in a rufous (reddish brown) suit and has a sooty black head and neck which makes it look as though it's been peering inside a coal shed! It has a very long glittering

ash grey, black-tipped tail, and a greyish white pattern on its wings. In the southern parts of the country, you may meet the **WHITEBELLIED TREE PIE** which, yes, has a white belly as well as abdomen and hindneck, a coal black head and chestnut coloured back.

Tree pies actually do love staying up in the trees, so the best way to know they're around is to listen out for them. They have a wide range of calls, both harsh sounding as well as musical. The harsh call sounds something like 'kitter-kitter-kitter!', the musical-box notes being 'ko-ki-la! ko-ki-la!' or 'bob-o-link! bob-o-link!' Often they will hop through the canopy going 'ta-chak-chak-chak-chak!' as though chortling disapprovingly over some dreadful treetop joke. And of course, just as you finish off your Kit Kat, will cock their heads and ask you innocently, 'thocolate? thocolate?'



Yes, they probably will eat chocolate if you offer them any, for like other crows, they will eat just about anything. Alas, they're known to actively search out and eat the eggs and chicks of other birds. Tree pies like lightly wooded areas and large unkempt gardens with lots of trees. Here in Delhi, I've often seen them scouting around in the cemetery in gangs of three or four, and once, for some reason, they thoroughly inspected the hollow top of a telephone pole. Possibly they were looking for a myna's nest. On another occasion I watched a tree pie remove soft nest lining from the abandoned nest of a squirrel — probably for its own nest. And yet another time watched one persistently harass a shikra — which is a small hawk — and ruin its chances of hunting by warning every bird around of its presence. (As I said, crows hate raptors!)

In the jungles, tree pies are expert at locating tiger and leopard kills, and their presence is often an indication that a kill is nearby.

CROWS found all over India **NEST** March-August **LAY** 4-5 eggs **BOTH PARENTS** rear their own and the young of cuckoos

TREE PIES found all over India **NEST** March-July **LAY** 4-5 eggs **BOTH PARENTS** rear the chicks



Flying kites



pariah kite

A kite once dived from the sky,
To grab my chicken-leg fry.
I whacked him one with it,
And said, "Now beat it!
Or you'll be my tandoori guy!"

If you've ever taken your tiffin out into your school playground, the chances are that it will have been snatched from your fingers by a kite. Actually, we don't pay much attention to these fantastic flyers because they're so common — and that's a great pity. They are truly wonderful flyers and spend hours in the hot blue skies, gliding in great circles with effortless grace, casually flicking a wing-tip or twisting a tail in order to change direction, emitting their strange mewling calls to one another. If they spot a snack far below (usually yours!), they'll launch a spectacular dive, whistling down at great speed, talons outstretched, ready to grab. Even in crowded narrow streets, they will plunge down fearlessly to snatch a scrap, deftly dodging the traffic and maze of wires and cables crisscrossing overhead. Sometimes they will engage each other in mock aerial combat; one bird will dive at another who will roll over and tangle its claws with those of the attacker. Thus entangled, both birds will tumble earthwards, only freeing themselves at the last moment.

A pair of **PARIAH** (or **BLACK**) **KITES** have been nesting in a silver birch tree in the garden for many years now. Their residence is a huge twiggy edifice that is renovated with new twigs every year. This year, two fine fledglings have recently left the nest after much wing-flapping practice and exercises. They're still a little shaky while landing and occasionally lose their balance, but they're gaining in confidence every day.

Sometimes, kite fledglings leave home too early. I've rescued a number who have tried to fly when not strong enough and crashed as a result. And I'm always astonished at how beautiful they are. They have the proud and haughty bearing of eagles (even if they're only juvenile kites that have crashed on their first flight!) and their chocolate brown plumage is tipped with gold. Not everyone, however, thinks they're handsome.

A neighbour once asked me to look after a kite fledgling that had crashed in his garden. He was very upset because this was a bad omen, he explained. The kite was a bird that ate carrion — dead creatures — and to have one land in your garden meant that someone was going to die and doomsday was not far away! All nonsense of course, and I told him to put it in a box (safe from cats) and give it some food and water. It would fly off when it was strong enough, which is exactly what happened.

Parent kites are very protective towards their young and it's wiser not to come too close to a tree with a nest which has young chicks. You are likely to be subjected to a frightening dive-bombing attack by the parents. Though kites are known to eat baby birds (as well as just about anything else), the pair in the silver birch tree have, so far, left unharmed the family of a pair of house sparrows who are neighbours in the same tree.

Every winter, over 500 migratory black kites arrive in the cemetery next door from the Himalayas and beyond. These birds have more prominent markings (long black streaks) on their bodies than do resident kites. During the day, they have a ding-dong battle with the monkeys that live in the cemetery. When they see people entering the cemetery with bread and rotis — to feed the monkeys — the kites swirl and dive all around them and try to prevent the monkeys from getting any. In revenge perhaps the monkeys will suddenly charge up the trees in which the kites are resting and send them flying off in panic. In the evenings the kites roost on the upper branches of the tall tamarind trees, safe out of the reach of the monkeys. But they are very watchful, and I know at once when a stranger enters the cemetery because they will all take off in great agitation and circle around noiselessly.

If you live in an area with a large water body — it could be the sea or a lake or a river or a large tank — you may have seen the handsome **BRAHMINY KITE**, which is attractively clad in russet and white. I see a lot of them from the flat in Goa, and often end up with a crick in my neck from watching them. The brahminy kite has a flaky white head, neck, upper back and breast, and a shiny chestnut coloured body and wings. It will swoop down on the water to pick up a small fish or scraps but also eats crabs, frogs, lizards, insects, baby birds and garbage. However, it has a timid nature and is often bullied by pariah kites and crows — as I once saw happening in the Delhi zoo.

KITES found all over India **NEST** September-April **LAY** 2 eggs **BOTH PARENTS** very protective of young



myna birds with major attitude

The mynas they strutted and squawked:
“We’ve travelled all over a lot,
To Australia and New Zealand,
And blue Pacific havens,
Where now they want us all shot!”



Scientists and ornithologists — those who study birds — often tell us that animals and birds don’t have feelings and emotions like we humans do. But I’ve often wondered if that can be entirely true. Especially when I’m eavesdropping on the conversation of a pair of coffee brown INDIAN MYNAS perched on the air-cooler in the balcony on hot summer afternoons. They stand companionably together, next to the water dish, and the male (I think) goes, ‘keek-keek-keek-churr-churr-CHURR-kok-kok-KOK?’ in a charming rich voice. He always seems to sound as though he’s just asked his wife some very important question or her opinion of some grave international matter. She replies with an affectionate knowing chuckle — as if to imply that she’s heard this many times before but never mind — and then off he goes again, frowzling up his plumage and nodding his head with excitement, ‘keek-keek-keek-churr-churr-CHURR-kok-kok-KOK?’ There’s charm, affection and humour in their tete-a-tete and I never tire of listening to it.

But just let them spot a cat and listen to the change in tone! They’ll unleash a string of loud jeering catcalls (what else, it is a cat after all!), hailing all the other birds in the neighbourhood to help them drive it away. There’s no mistaking their anger and outrage now.

The ‘cooler couple’, as I call them, are pretty smart too. Often they will drop rock hard bread crusts into the water dish to soften them up, like we dip biscuits into our tea. Sometimes they’re a bit too smart though — like when they start bathing in the water dish which is meant for drinking only!

Certainly, Indian mynas are no pushovers. I once saw a pair evict a foolish-looking pair of roseringed parakeets from their nest hole and take over the place for their own

residence. When such sites are in short supply, mynas will enthusiastically fight each other over them, with several onlooker birds forming a ring around the combatants, cheering and screeching encouragement, just like in any playground dust-up.

City life suits Indian mynas just fine and they will eat almost anything they can find. But they are also very important pollinators (yes, VIPs!) of plants like the fig, mulberry and sandal, and are responsible for scattering seeds far and wide. While they do help themselves to fruit in orchards and grain in fields — which farmers do not like — they are excellent pest control birds and consume vast numbers of harmful insects.

Indian mynas have long been kept as pets and have been taken around the world by settlers. They now also live in Australia, New Zealand, several islands in the Pacific and Atlantic oceans, and even Hawaii. In many of these places they have prospered more than local birds because they're tougher, more adaptable, and quite simply have got attitude baby, which is what counts!

If you've ever travelled around north and central India by train, you may have noticed hordes of battleship grey mynas with brick red skin around their eyes, swarming about railway stations and platforms, and even entering carriages and inspecting baggage. Slightly smaller than Indian mynas, these are BANK OR RAILWAY MYNAS and they nest in colonies in horizontal tunnels dug in sandbanks, or the 'weepholes' left in walls to let the rainwater drain out. Like Indian mynas, they too are pretty gang-minded and especially so when a gang of juveniles chase after and mob a harassed adult for a titbit. They always remind me of a crowd invading the pitch and chasing a cricketer for an autograph!

Here in Delhi, every morning I watch a large flock of bank mynas fly over the house and head south towards the wholesale fruit markets where they will shop all day — and of courses not pay! In the evening they fly back north towards their roosting place which I think is in a large grove of acacia trees nearby.

One evening a great thunder-and-lightning storm broke and caught the birds in mid-journey. It scared and confused the daylights out of them and, screeching with agitation, they lined up on the parapets and terraces of the surrounding buildings. Actually they looked quite attractive — thundercloud grey birds perched against a background of thunderclouds. But they were in a terrible state. As the lightning speared down and the dark clouds overhead spat big silver bullets of rain, the birds swirled and screeched even more demoniacally. It reminded me of the menacing scenes in Alfred Hitchcock's thriller movie, *The Birds*, and made me quite uneasy. Then suddenly, even as the rain continued, they regained their composure and flew off towards their roosting



place. I think they had been scared by the lightning that splintered their usually friendly skies and were not prepared to fly until it stopped.

My personal favourite among the mynas, however, is the **BRAHMINY** or **BLACKHEADED MYNA**, also known as the **BRAHMINY STARLING**. It wears what looks like rufous corduroy and has a 'gelled look' black head and crest. This delightful crest, so like a schoolboy's 'shendi' or tuft, usually refuses to sit down properly and stands up hilariously when the bird gets excited or gets blown this way and that in a strong breeze. The myna's wings are greyish black, the bill is yellow, and there's a wonderful wild staring look in its eyes. When in love, it will throw back its head and sing with all its heart and soul, rolling its eyes passionately, looking like some vagabond minstrel serenading an unattainable princess!

Brahminy mynas don't usually flock in big gangs like the others; pairs usually stick together. They too nest in holes in walls or tree trunks, and I've recently seen some investigating drain holes in the walls of buildings in the complex. Brahminy mynas will delight you all over India!



brahminy myna



pied myna

Of the four kinds of mynas I regularly see from the house, the **PIED MYNA** appears to be the best behaved and with the quietest nature. Neatly dressed in black and white, with orange skin around the eye and an orange yellow bill, there are often a pair or two hopping about on the lawn picking up insects as good, decent birds should do. They have a look of permanent innocent surprise on their faces. Don't be fooled! When they collect to roost in the evenings in their thousands, they can make more noise than crowds cheering an Indian victory in the World Cup at Eden Gardens! Pied mynas build large untidy domed nests made out of straw, roots and rags. These mynas are found all over central and northern India.

MYNAS found all over India **NEST** March-September **LAY** 3-6 eggs **BOTH PARENTS** look after the chicks

quarrelsome birds of peace



blue rock pigeons

A pigeon once got in my hair,
And laid four neat white eggs there.
The chicks that did hatch,
Grew juicy and fat,
And I said, "Yum-yum, what a catch!"



Pigeons and doves have long been regarded as birds of peace, and I believed this too until I saw a pair of BLUE ROCK PIGEONS try to tear each other's throats out on the eucalyptus tree outside my balcony. One bird had caught hold of the neck of his enemy with his beak as if with a pair of pincers, and was tugging away for all he was worth while the other bird flapped and fluttered helplessly. Ultimately he broke free and fled.

That apart, I've always thought that both pigeons and doves are pretty dumb. Take pigeons for example: every city is simply infested with familiar blue grey birds with their iridescent throats and orange eyes. They nest in the most inconvenient and silly places. In one case, a pair had laid their eggs on the top of a friend's refrigerator. Another pair I know have built their nest in the service bay of the garage where I give my car for repairs. I mean, they've got to be crazy: the noise level inside that garage is greater than that of any school playground during recess and there are powerful jets of water whooshing around all over the place when the cars are serviced. Sometimes I think the birds' brains have been weakened because of all the lead and other poisonous fumes they must be inhaling. Imagine, their chicks must be breathing in the same deadly stuff!

Bird brains, right? Well, the thing is that pigeons, dumb as they may seem, have amongst the finest of navigational skills of all birds. They can find their way back home from just about anywhere, and certainly better than I could if I were suddenly plonked in the middle of nowhere and told to find my way back home. Special pigeons called carrier pigeons have been bred to develop this talent and, during the Second World War, were used to carry secret messages. Their services were also used by the police authorities in India in the old



blue rock pigeon



days to carry messages from far-flung stations to headquarters. Pigeon racing too is a popular sport in which the birds are released from various strange places and have to race back to their home lofts. We're still not sure about how they manage to find their way home so accurately.

Actually the blue rock pigeon is a pretty successful fat bird and has adapted well to life in big cities all over the world. In the wild these pigeons lived on cliff ledges and caves; in New York and Mumbai and London they live on skyscraper parapets and in air-conditioning ducts! They have been helped to settle in cities by us as in every city people regularly scatter grain and bread for them (and get spattered in return!). They're even known to eat buildings! When the female requires more calcium in her diet in order to strengthen her eggs, she pecks at the crumbling mortar of buildings, which is rich in calcium. When thousands of pigeons do this, well, the building gets eaten!

Blue rock pigeons breed nearly all the time and the males spend a lot of their time fluffing themselves up and twirling round and round gurgling, 'gootr-goo, gootr-goo, gootr-goo!' The female often ignores him or flies away and he usually continues twirling all on his own. The chicks or squabs are fed on a rich nourishing liquid called pigeon's milk which is produced by both the adults.

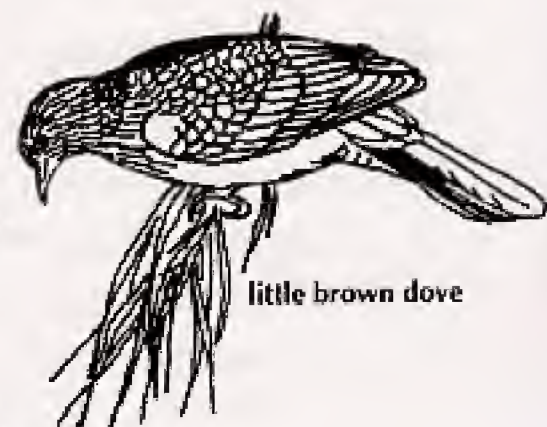


The **COLLARED OR RING DOVE** always reminds me of someone who has been applying too much face powder in order to look more fair and lovely! Dressed in pale beige, the collared dove is recognisable by the narrow black half collar it wears on the sides of its neck. I often see them taking off vertically from the neem trees in the cemetery and then planing down in a spiral, uttering a rather foolish-sounding 'koon-koon-koon' as they do this. The idea behind this flight display is to tell other male collared doves to stay away from the area. I've also seen them pluckily chase away crows from near their nests and on several occasions have got the distinct feeling that the crow was simply teasing the dove. But crows do eat baby birds and eggs, so the doves have got to be vigilant.

Collared doves, like others of their family, eat grain and seeds and when these are scattered on the ground, may gather in large numbers to enjoy the feast. I once came across a gathering of 200-300 birds on the ground, all bobbing their heads and eating very seriously indeed. These birds too have recently moved into many western countries.

The **LITTLE BROWN DOVE** is perhaps the sweetest of the pigeons and doves I see from my window and in summer, a pair of these slim, pinkish brown, flowerpot coloured doves

regularly visit the balcony to drink water. They look like very serious little birds, but are also called laughing doves and have a 'chessboard' pattern on the sides of their necks. Often on hot summer afternoons, I hear them croon drowsily 'coo-roo-roo, coo-roo-roo' from the window which some people think sounds like soft laughter (hence the name laughing doves) but which makes me feel even more sleepy.



GREEN PIGEONS are very difficult to spot unless you catch them sunning themselves from the top of bare branches — either early



green pigeon

in the morning or late in the afternoon — which is something they like doing. They are gentle-looking pigeons, in yellow, olive green and ash grey and have lilac shoulder patches and yellow legs. I've seen them on a few occasions on the neem tree in the cemetery next door but they seem to prefer peepul and banyan trees on whose figs they feed. It is very difficult to spot them in these leafy trees. Once they know you're looking for them, they

keep very still and become invisible. When you do spot one, you'll find that it has spotted you first and is staring curiously at you. One reason why green pigeons are so elusive is that they are a favourite target of hunters and they know it.

DOVES and PIGEONS found all over India **NEST** practically throughout the year **LAY** 2 eggs **BOTH PARENTS** look after the chicks



Three cheers for bulbuls

The bulbul is one happy fellow,
Who will greet you with a musical "Hello!"
He doesn't mind in the least,
If you shout like a beast,
"Hey look, his bum is bright yellow!"



white-eared bulbul

I looked furtively round the garden but there were no birds — especially bulbuls — around; the coast was clear. I climbed onto the raised flower-bed and stuck my head into the hedge. It was like entering another world — a dark, hushed, musty-smelling world of meshing, crisscrossing branches and a thousand leaves. When my eyes got used to the dimness, I looked about carefully, particularly where the branches forked and spread. But no, I never found the nest of the **WHITE-EARED** (or **WHITECHEEKED**) **BULBULS** that I was looking for and that I knew just had to be somewhere here.

For several past mornings I had noticed a pair of white-eared bulbuls diving in and out of the hedge, their beaks full of bulbul baby-food (squishy insects and caterpillars). They were a cheerful-looking pair, dressed in a silvery grey brown plumage with prominent white cheeks, and — glory be! — a pineapple yellow vent (for which reason I nicknamed them the Sunshine Bottoms!). They wore a short black crest which looked as though it had been snipped off. (Their hill-dwelling cousins, the **HIMALAYAN BULBULS**, who are otherwise very similar, have crests that look like a court jester's cap, bobbing forward over their foreheads.)

On several occasions I had also heard the Sunshine Bottoms singing from the top of the small Chinese orange tree near the hedge, 'tea-for-two, tea-for-two, tea-for-two' or 'take-me-with-you, take-me-with-you' in a variety of melodious ways. They had had several fierce arguments with a pair of redvented bulbuls who had wanted to nest in the same place. In Delhi, white-eared bulbuls are not as common as the other two types — the redvented and redwhiskered — which was why I was so keen to find their home. But I never did find it and didn't want to keep on searching lest I disturbed them. Now, they have gone. White-eared bulbuls are residents of the northern and north-western parts of the country.

On the other hand, there had been a pair of **REDWHISKERED BULBULS** who had nested in a potted plant right inside the verandah of our Mumbai flat many years ago.

The redwhiskered bulbul is a slimly built bird, coffee brown above, whitish below, with silky crimson cheek tufts and matching crimson vents. It wears a jaunty black crest and has a black 'chinstrap' which makes it look like a decorative palace guard. It sings a cheerful song with clear tinkling notes and words that may sound like 'the rice must be finished off' or 'pleased to meet you'! Which, of course, you always are.

The nest in our verandah was a beautifully woven cup of supple twiglets and had been built in the heart of the plant which had long, thorn-edged, serrated leaves (like the blade of a saw or the jaws of a shark!) and so was well protected. If you were very quiet, you could sneak up and watch one of the parents incubate the eggs: sitting quietly on them, at peace with the world.

We were looking forward to the hatching of the chicks but alas, that was not to be. We had a party one night and the noise and babble scared the bulbuls away. They left behind their tiny eggs as a sad souvenir. We should have postponed our party.

Up in the hills of Palampur in Himachal Pradesh, a pair of **REDVENTED BULBULS** virtually invited me into their home, though they obviously wanted to do just the opposite! Redvented bulbuls are dark all over and have somewhat scaly-looking plumage, especially around their necks. Their heads are black and vents are crimson and they too have short, 'snipped off' looking crests like the white-eared bulbuls. They're quite common in cities and are rather short-tempered birds, always getting into scraps with each other. For this reason they have been trained by us as fighting birds — though this is illegal.

Anyway, I was plodding through the wet monsoon grass in the garden when I heard this urgent, agitated 'peep-peep-peep-peetit' coming from somewhere nearby. I stopped in my tracks and looked around. There, low down, near a small citrus tree, were a pair of redvented bulbuls fluttering about nervously. In a fork low down on the tree, was the small neat nest, quite well hidden by the leaves. A soft cheeping emerged from it so I knew there were young in it. Redvented bulbuls have nested successfully several times in our hedge and every year, around July or August, you can see a couple of wide-eyed, untidily-crested youngsters anxiously follow their parents around in the garden.

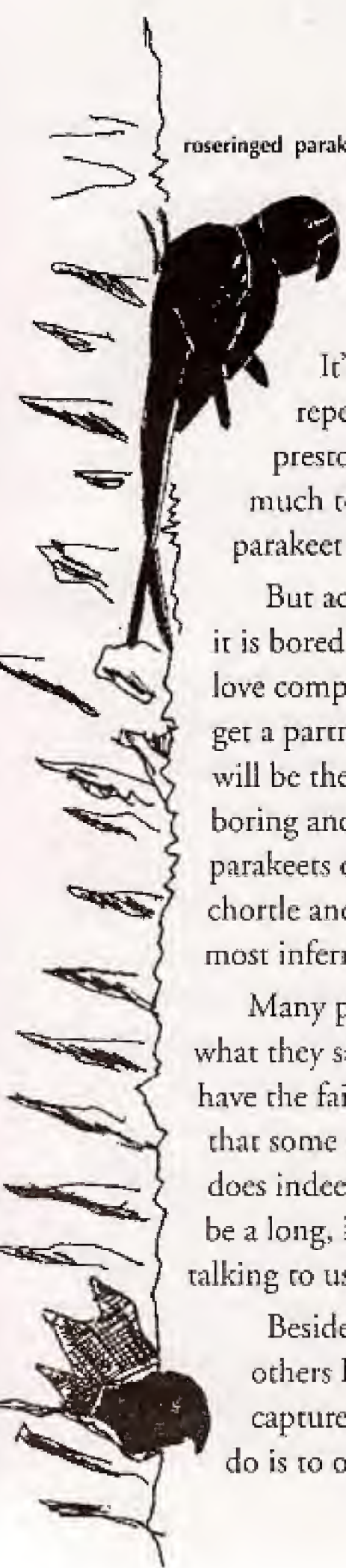


redvented bulbul

BULBULS found all over India **NEST** white-eared March-June; redwhiskered February-August; redvented February-November **LAY** 2-4 eggs **BOTH PARENTS** rear the chicks



Talking about parrots



rose-ringed parakeets

"Will you be my pretty Polly?
And sit in this cage by me?"
Asked Mithoo the tota.
I lied, "I'm too mota,"
And quickly let him go free.

It's funny, you know. Catch a **PARAKEET**, put it in a cage all by itself, repeat 'pretty Polly' or 'Mithoo!' to it about a thousand times and hey presto, one morning it will say 'pretty Polly' or 'Mithoo!' back to you, much to your delight. Yes, yes, yesss! You've done it at last! Taught your parakeet to talk . . .

But actually that story is a sad one. Your parakeet has only spoken because it is bored out of its mind, sitting by itself in its cage the whole day. Parakeets love company — especially of their own kind. Ah, then, so maybe you could get a partner for your pet, you think. You could, of course, and your parakeet will be the happier for it. But it might stop talking to you because it finds you boring and now has someone of its own kind to talk to! Amongst themselves, parakeets don't say things like, 'Who's a pretty Polly?' and 'Mithoo!'. They chortle and chuckle and squawk and scream and shout and yell and make the most infernal racket!

Many parakeet owners will swear that their beloved Mithoos understand what they say. Most scientists say this is nonsense; they hold that parrots don't have the faintest idea about the meaning of what they say. I read somewhere that some researcher has shown that her African grey parrot (the best talker) does indeed appear to understand what it says. But I would think that it would be a long, long time — if ever — before parrots say they prefer life in a cage talking to us to one flying free.

Besides, did you know that for every parakeet you see in a cage, three others have died? Only about one bird in four survives the process of being captured and brought to the market. So the best thing you could probably do is to open your parakeet's cage door and watch it streak away with a

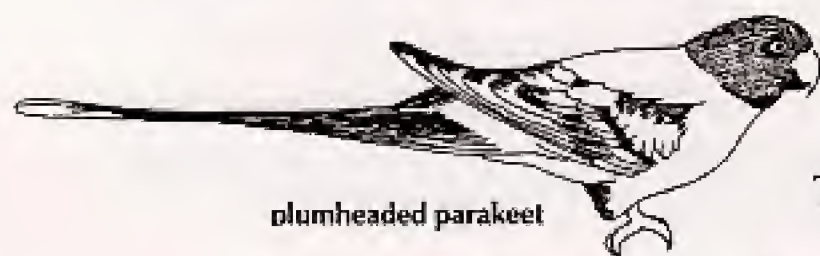
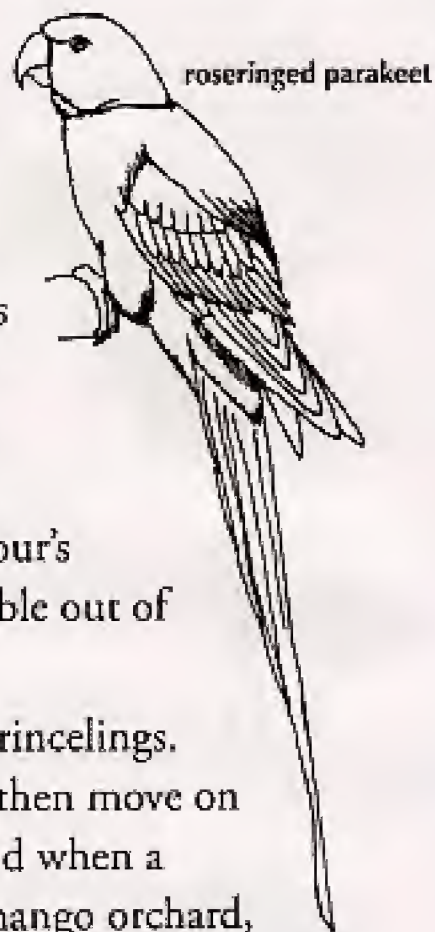
scream of joy! (Don't do this if you have an exotic parrot like a macaw or cockatoo — it won't be able to survive in the wild here.) But no, don't go out and buy more parakeets just so that you can free them. Every bird that you buy will be replaced by the birdseller by another wild-caught one and that means three more wild parakeets must unnecessarily die. Actually, if no one bought parakeets, there would be no need to trap them any more and the problem would be solved.

The **ROSERINGED PARAKEET** is probably the most common parakeet in India, and probably the most common caged bird too. Grass green in colour, sharp as a chilli, it has a bright red nutcracker-like bill and the male wears a handsome, dark rose pink collar around its neck. The orange eyes bulge slightly and the big round head makes the bird look like a bald scholar or professor. Roseringed parakeets streak across the skies like small ear-splitting missiles. Normally so deafening, they maintain pin-drop silence while raiding the neighbour's guava tree. I'm always amazed by the number of parakeets that tumble out of the tree when they're shooed away.

Most parakeets eat grain, fruit and berries, but feed like spoilt princelings. They'll take a bite out of, say, a juicy mango, spit half of it out and then move on to another, thus wasting far more than they actually need to eat. And when a screeching mob of 500 parakeets does this in your prized litchi or mango orchard, you certainly would want to lock them all up in cages! Seriously, parakeets are bad news for farmers and orchard owners.

In many cities, people feed birds every morning and parakeets certainly don't miss out on the goodies. One morning in a park, I saw a flock of maybe 30 or 40 roseringed parakeets all lined up along the top of a wall where birdseed was scattered, busily eating away. They looked exactly like diners at a very long and exclusive dining table — though their table manners were not as proper.

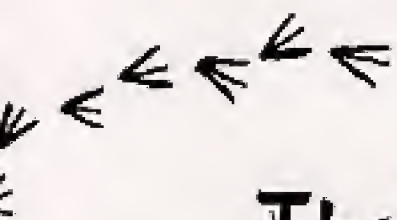
My favourite city parakeet, however, is the **PLUMHEADED** or **BLOSSOMHEADED PARAKEET**, which is slightly smaller than the roseringed parakeet, and prefers large wooded parks. The male has a head like a ripe plum, an orange yellow bill, maroon shoulder patches, and a white-tipped greeny blue tail. His wife has a dark grey head with a yellow collar and matching yellow bill and no shoulder patch. Together they make an attractive pair. I often see



them streaking overhead, screaming 'tooi? tooi-tooi?!' questioningly as they whizz past. I've always felt that if you're down in the dumps, all you need to do is to watch a flock of plumheaded parakeets arrow back and forth, screaming 'tooi? tooi-tooi?' You'll feel better immediately! Because of their call, the birds have been nicknamed 'Tuiyas'.

So, what's the difference between a parrot and a parakeet? Well, parakeets are usually small to medium-sized parrots, with long tails and are found in our (Asia, South-east Asia) part of the world. Parrots can be pretty huge and chunky (like the macaws) and are found mainly in Africa and the Americas. Thus, a roseringed parakeet is a type of parrot, but an African grey parrot is NOT a type of parakeet!

PARAKEETS found all over India **NEST** January-April **LAY** 3-4 eggs **BOTH PARENTS** rear the chicks



Those untidy jungli babblers

Six babblers that entered the garden,
Saw me and their frowns then did harden.
I was laughing, you know,
At their untidy show,
And never even said, "Beg pardon!"



jungle babbler

They're called **JUNGLE BABBLERS** but they can be found in gardens and parks in cities and towns nearly all over India. What I like very much about these myna-sized, 'brown paper' birds is how they go about behaving as though they're big-dada cop birds, while in reality they're just big softies and actually quite foolish.

They're gloriously untidy-looking and have long dangly tails which look as though they're about to fall off. When they get excited, which is often, they fluff up the feathers on their backs and look even more dishevelled and 'jungli'. Then they have this fierce, glowering expression on their faces which is so frowny it makes you want to laugh. To top it all, there is the hilarious way in which they go about their daily business in your garden — as though they're a party of cops raiding the hideout of a gold smuggler.

They will hop into the garden through the hedge — always in a group of about six or

seven — and look around furtively in case you have hired a cat to ambush them. All the while they'll be uttering these dark, secretive 'ke-ke-ke' calls to one another and flicking their tails like cops swinging their lathis. Then they'll start turning over dead leaves and dirt as though looking for gold bars but actually snapping up beetles, grubs, spiders and worms — yuck! If they spot you grinning rudely at them, they'll lean forward and peer at you shortsightedly out of their pale yellow eyes and fluff up their feathers threateningly.

Sometimes jungle babblers will even demand to come inside and search your house! They have come banging on our windows on several occasions, making us jump with surprise. Actually the suspicious idiots are just pecking at their own reflections in the glass, something they also do with shiny car hubcaps and bumpers.

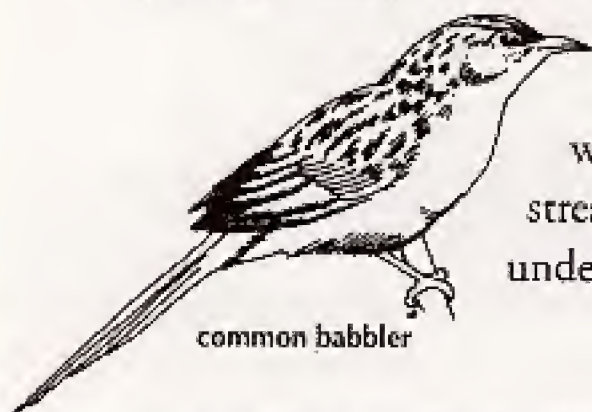
But guess what these tough-cop dada birds seem to love doing the most? When I saw them at it for the first time, I could hardly believe my eyes. They were perched out there on the bottlebrush tree, three or four of them, wedged tightly together all in a row, each bird very earnestly grooming the one sitting next to it. As they probed and ruffled each other's neck and back feathers with their bills, they closed their eyes with bliss and ecstasy — but still managed to look very cross at the same time! Occasionally they would get so carried away that one bird would clamber on the back of the next in order to groom it properly. And in spite of all this hairdressing they still ended up looking as untidy as ever!

Sometimes I see a group of **LARGE GREY BABBLERS** in the garden hopping about at the base of the silver birch trees. They're a little larger than jungle babblers, greyish brown in colour with light ash grey markings on their foreheads and glaring yellow eyes. Their long dangling tails are edged with whitish feathers, which are visible when they fly. Large grey babblers have a loud, monotonous 'kay-kay-kay' call, which sounds like their brains need to be oiled!



large grey babbler

COMMON BABBLERS sound very different indeed, and Wag, my dog, gets very excited when he hears them calling in the garden because he mistakes them for squirrels — which have to be chased. I think they sound rather like a musical alarm clock going off: a piping, trilling 'which-which-which-ri-ri-ri', or more loudly, (if you're still asleep!) 'pieuu-u-u pieuu-u-u', and (if your school bus has honked and left!) a high-pitched 'qwee-qwee-e-e-e' which in fact is the bird's warning call. They are slim, earthy brown birds with heavily streaked plumage and off-white throats and creamy brown underparts. They come bouncing into the garden or scuttle mouse-

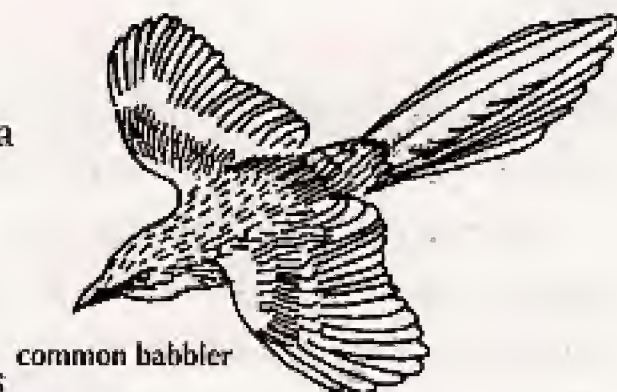


common babbler



like from the shade of one bush to the next, their tails dangling loosely behind. Unlike the other two, they have a friendly sparkle in their eyes and appear to be carefree.

But when it comes to nesting, all these babblers are absolute duffers and stupidly allow piedcrested cuckoos and common hawk-cuckoos to lay their eggs in their nests which are placed in bushes.



Apart from their general behaviour and appearance, I hugely enjoy watching babblers fly. They will launch themselves off a low branch one after another, flap frantically and glide, then-flap-then-glide-then-flap-then-glide, losing height all the way, their tails flared out and apparently having very little control of where they're going. I'm amazed I haven't yet seen a group of six or seven of them crash into each other, one after another, on landing. Because babblers like going around in groups of six or more, they're called the 'seven sisters', which in Hindi however has got converted into 'saat bhai' which means seven brothers!

BABBLERS found all over India **NEST** throughout the year **LAY** 3-4 eggs **BOTH PARENTS** raise chicks



tailorbird

Tales of two tiny tots

Have you heard the tailorbird shout,
As it hops this way and that way about?
"Jimmy-Jimmy!" it will yell,
"I can sew very well!"
What a dreadful tiny loudmouth!

People often say to me enviously, "Ah, but you must have seen a **TAILORBIRD** build its nest, many times," and I just hum and haw and change the subject. Because no, I have not yet managed to observe a tailorbird stitching together its nest of leaves, or, for that matter, even found a completed nest in the garden. But yes, there was this tailorbird who used to come to the balcony every morning and yank at the stuffing in my dog Wag's bed. To be

used as nest lining material. But the little olive green bird would pull out a tuft and vanish into the surrounding greenery before I could see where it had gone.

Rather slim and dainty to look at, the tailorbird wears an orange cap and flicks a long, pin-pointed tail excitedly over its back as it hops about. It is even smaller than a sparrow, but its voice, by God, is ten times as loud. It'll perch jauntily on a twig at arm's length, and shout, 'towit-towit-towit!' or 'pitchik-pitchik-pitchik!' or 'chubit-chubit-chubit!' or lustily sing 'jimmy-jimmy-jimmy!'.

However, it is not for shouting that the tailorbird is famous but for its ability to stitch leaves together to form a conical pouch or funnel in which the actual nest — a cup made of fibres, cotton waste, my dog's mattress and such materials — is made. Broad-leaved plants are preferred for this and vegetable fibres are used for string.

There appears to be some argument amongst ornithologists over exactly who stitches the nest — the male or the female. Some believe that the male simply fetches the material and his wife is the seamstress and nest builder, while others believe that he is the tailor master. At any rate, tailorbirds have been known to nest in suitable potted plants as well as verandah creepers. They eat tiny insects and sip nectar.

Another smart little hedge-hopper is the **ASHY WREN-WARBLER**, also called the **ASHY PRINIA**, and let me tell you rightaway that several years ago a pair did indeed nest inside our garden. Sadly, a goonda crow discovered the nest and made short work of the chicks.

The ashy wren-warbler is about the same size as the tailorbird but has a darkish brown body and steel grey head and is pale biscuit-coloured underneath. It also has a long pointed tail that looks like it is very loosely attached. It likes hopping about at the bottom of the hedges looking for insects, uttering a sharp 'tee-tee-tee' as it goes about its business. This changes to a strange-sounding 'kit-kit-kit!' when you get too close and sounds like sparks are being struck. Ashy wren-warblers may also stitch leaves together or simply construct a pouch of woven fibres using cobweb to bind them together, and supported by stalks of tall grass or reeds.

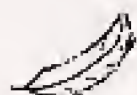


ashy wren-warbler

TAILORBIRDS found all over India **NEST** April-September **LAY** 3-5 eggs **BOTH PARENTS** raise chicks

ASHY WREN-WARBLERS found all over India **NEST** March-September **LAY** 3-4 peanut-like eggs

BOTH PARENTS raise chicks



The maestro of las palmas

Magpie robins are suited and smart,
And music is their chosen forte.
They play their own flutes,
And compose their own suites,
And sound like Wolfgang Mozart!



Whenever you move into a new house or flat or even room, it takes you a day or two to get used to the strange smells and sounds (and neighbours!) of your surroundings. What surprises awaited us here, in this flat in Goa, I thought, on our first night there some summers ago. Outside, it was still and silent — even the coconut palms had stopped whispering and rustling and seemed to be asleep. The owls too, seemed to be off duty.

Suddenly a long, sweet, melodious whistle broke the night's silence. There was a brief pause, then another delicate flute-like call. I peered at my watch. 3 a.m. 3 a.m.! Why was this wretched bird singing at this unearthly hour when it wasn't even a nightingale? I knew it was the **MAGPIE ROBIN** — but had to admit that I had never heard one sing so beautifully before. Half-irritated, half-enchanted I listened. He was warbling almost continuously now from somewhere close outside the bedroom window. "Mad Mozart," I thought suddenly. Mozart, because he seemed to be as talented as that famous music composer, and Mad because you've got to be crazy to begin a concert at three o' clock in the morning. A disturbing thought struck me. Did he do this every morning at 3 a.m.?

I saw him and his wife in the garden the next day. About the size of a myna, he was a perky, glossy, black and white bird with a long cocked-up tail, black on top, white underneath. His wings were black with a jagged white streak through them, his throat and breast were also black, but his tummy was shining white. His wife was grey and white and calm-looking. Both of them were busy fluttering down to the flower-beds to pick up insects. Occasionally Mad Mozart would fly up to the water tank on the terrace and sing a short sweet melody.

He was at it again, early next morning, but this time thankfully began his concert at 5.30 a.m., so if you were a birdwatcher you really couldn't complain. Over the following mornings, I began noticing a very interesting thing about his performances. He would

begin singing from, say, the water tank on the terrace of the next-door block and sing a particular melody from this spot. After 10 or 15 minutes he would fly off to another spot, say, the mango tree at the far end of the compound and begin singing a different song from here. And so on, to a third and maybe fourth spot, before he would return to the water tank again.

I thought at first there was really nothing surprising about that — any talented musician would get tired of singing the same old song again and again. Besides, if you woke up people (and your wife) at 5.30 every morning, you jolly well ought to give them a variety of melodies to listen to and enjoy. But then I read an explanation of what Mad Mozart was really up to, and boy, was he a wily fellow!

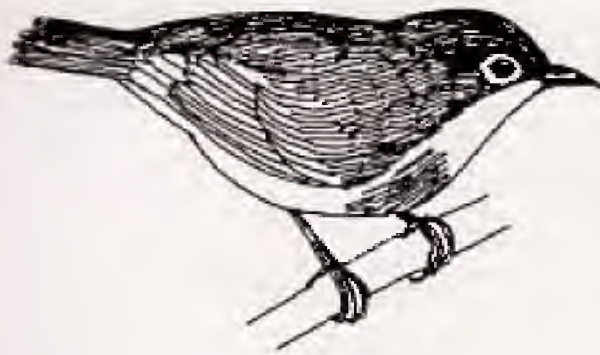
Male birds sing for two main reasons — to attract a mate, and to let other males know of their presence in an area and to warn them to stay away. Well, Mad Mozart already had a wife, so he was obviously singing only to keep any rival magpie robins away from the area. The Las Palmas apartment block and surrounding coconut groves were his exclusive territory. And for a pair of magpie robins it was a pretty large territory. Any other male magpie robin in search of a nice place to live, might well have thought, “Hey, this place is great and too big for that selfish Mad Mozart fellow! I can move in too — and maybe even steal his wife!” Except that there appeared to be one problem: it seemed as though Mad Mozart was not the only magpie robin in the area because, according to the different songs he — the intruder — could hear every morning, there appeared to be three or four males residing in different sections of the apartment complex. There was one who sang from the top of the water tank on the terrace, another who sang from the mango tree and a third who sang from the terrace of the northern block and so on. And so, by pretending to be three or four different males — by singing different songs from different perches — Mad Mozart was successful in defending a territory that was otherwise too large for a single bird.

Sometimes, late in the evenings, you can hear the magpie robin emit a harsh ‘churr!’ from deep within some bush, and can hardly believe that it is the same bird that can sing so sweetly. I’ve always thought they call like this because someone somewhere has said or written something nasty about their musical performance — like about their habit of starting to sing at unearthly hours in the morning! Incidentally, the magpie robin is a relative of one of the finest singers in the country — the shama — who is a shy, forest-dwelling musician. They normally nest in holes in old walls or tree trunks.

MAGPIE ROBINS found all over India **NEST** February-August **LAY** 3-5 eggs **BOTH PARENTS** raise the chicks



Jingling flowerbirds



white-eye

They jingle ever so softly,
As they flit in the trees flipsy-flopsy,
White-eyes are quite mellow,
Solemn spectacled fellows,
Who love hanging round tipsy-topsy!

Once again I have to thank the bottlebrush tree in the garden for letting me have a really close look at a lovely bird — in this case, at **WHITE-EYES**. You see, these little yellow birds who are smaller (and sweeter) than sparrows adore the nectar of bottlebrush flowers (actually they adore the nectar of many flowers) and flock to the tree jingling softly and musically to each other, 'tsip-tsip-tsip' or (try to say this!) 'sisfesife-sisfesife', as they hop nimbly from bloom to bloom. They look very solemn — almost studious — because they have this ring of tiny white feathers around their eyes which makes them look as if they're wearing spectacles. Otherwise, they're greenish yellow on top, with brighter yellow on the throat and breast, and greyish white underneath. Their bill is slender and very slightly curved — just right for probing flowers for nectar.

In the hills I would think white-eyes are even more common than sparrows. I know the garden in Palampur was simply full of them; they quivered and jingled in every bush and tree. But they're hard-to-see birds because they merge so well with the foliage and they're always moving about so restlessly. Often they hang upside down while inspecting flowers and, in addition to nectar, will pick up caterpillars, insects, seeds and berries. They also like pecking holes into sweet mangoes and guavas and sucking up the juice. They usually move around in groups of up to 50 birds, so if you miss out on spotting one bird, there will always be others. The best thing to do is to sit under a flowering tree or bush (like pointsettia) and wait until you hear them jingling softly amongst the leaves and branches.

WHITE-EYES found all over India **NEST** April-September **LAY** 2-4 eggs **BOTH PARENTS** raise the chicks

Jewelbirds of the sun



purple sunbirds

Like jewels they glisten and glitter,
The sunbirds that zip, zing and twitter.
From flower to flower,
They probe and they hover,
For nectar that gives them the power!

'Wich-wich-wich-cheewit-cheewit-cheewit!' I looked up from the typewriter and gritted my teeth. No! I would not be distracted from my work by some pipsqueak of a purple sunbird going berserk on the bottlebrush tree outside. I had seen purple sunbirds a hundred times before and . . . 'cheewit-CHEEWIT-CHEEWIT!' By God! This fellow was probably on the bougainvillea creeper right on the balcony . . . I would be able to see every spangle and sequin on his body . . . Besides, there was something in his song (if you could call it that) that said, "What kind of an idiot are you, sitting in your room facing the wall, typing away on such a glorious day? Come on, man, get up and enjoy!"

I abandoned the typewriter. He was on the bottlebrush tree all right, dressed from head to toe in metallic midnight blue and dark purple: a tiny, excitable fellow, smaller than a sparrow with a fine, needle-like bill with which he probed the scarlet blooms. Every now and then he would look around and excitedly shrill 'cheewit-cheewit-cheewit!' in a high-pitched voice, fluttering his wings and showing off his deep crimson and yellow armpits. Of course, like any pop star (which is what he reminded me of) he couldn't keep still for a moment and kept zipping from bloom to bloom so that I had a hard time following him. Then his wife joined him but she, poor soul, was dressed in a dull olive yellow plumage. In the non-breeding season — between September and February — I knew her husband would also look like her, except he would wear a purple necktie as a mark of identification.

So, yes, purple sunbirds get you all excited even if you've seen them a hundred times before but there are other sunbirds out there that can really zap you! I was stomping about in the rain-drenched garden in Palampur one afternoon, frowning at a great dark cloud that had decided to visit, when a flicker caught my eye near the bed of an orange and yellow 'red hot poker' — a type of nectar-yielding flower — that glowed in the



cloud's shadow. A slim, delicate bird whirred out from the bushes and hovered briefly over the flowers before settling on a stalk, its eyes glittering. I looked at it through the binoculars and gasped.

Its head was metallic emerald green, its breast and back were crimson scarlet, its elongated ribbon-like tail also silky emerald. It had two jagged purple 'lightning flashes' streaking backwards across its cheeks from its long slender bill. It was the **YELLOWBACKED SUNBIRD** though I couldn't quite make out the yellow patch on its back from which it got its name. Actually, its name has recently been changed to **CRIMSON SUNBIRD** which is much more sensible, because it really is more crimson than yellowbacked. Like the purple sunbird, it too was very restless.



yellowbacked sunbirds

Many months later I saw these same species of sunbirds in the garden in sunny Goa and thought, hah! now I would be able to photograph them to my heart's content. Not a chance! The birds would zip from the cannas to the allemandas to the hibiscus and back to the cannas before I could even spot them in the camera's viewfinder. Else they'd hop cheekily on the satellite dish and then whirr off to investigate the neighbour's flowering bushes. And always they'd turn up 'chweeting' excitedly at four o' clock in the afternoon, when it was the hottest. I spent hours prowling around after them, sweating and muttering evilly and not getting any pictures.

What made matters even worse was that the crimson sunbirds were usually accompanied by **PURPLERUMPED SUNBIRDS** who were equally good at giving me the royal runaround. These guys have a metallic green crown, a deep crimson back, a purple rump and throat and a lemon yellow breast and belly. Whew! They really were quite dazzling as they zinged about the garden like jewelbirds from the sun.

Sunbirds are often mistaken as hummingbirds and are a delight in every garden which has nectar-rich flowers. A pair of purple sunbirds had once started building a nest looking like a small bag of rubbish hanging from a branch, bound up with cobwebs in the bougainvillea creeper outside the drawing room window but all too soon the monkeys discovered it and destroyed it. Which was a pity because I would have been able to watch the chicks being raised while relaxing comfortably in the drawing room!

PURPLE SUNBIRDS found all over India **NEST** March-May in pendulous bag-like structure of fine twigs, grass and rubbish bound up in cobweb **LAY** 2-3 eggs **ONLY FEMALE** builds nest and incubates, both parents feed the chicks
PURPLERUMPED SUNBIRDS found in peninsular India **NEST** throughout the year **LAY** 2 eggs **ONLY FEMALE** builds nest and incubates, both parents feed the chicks
CRIMSON SUNBIRDS found all over India **NEST** April-October **LAY** 2-3 eggs **NOT CLEAR** who incubates and feeds

Funny birds of summer



coppersmith

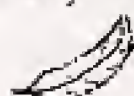
The coppersmith is dressed like a clown,
Red, yellow, green but not brown.
He's small and he's dumpy,
And sometimes quite jumpy,
But no, you will not see him frown!

I have often been asked how I became interested in birds and birdwatching. Well, it happened like this. I had been told a lot about the wonderful, beautiful world of birds but had not bothered very much about them. With the naked eye, all you normally saw were restless black blobs fluttering about in the distance which was neither interesting nor fun. So I decided to invest in a good pair of binoculars and saved up for them. Eventually I bought myself a pair of big, powerful (and rather too heavy) binoculars and took them to the verandah of our flat in Mumbai where we then lived. I focussed them on the first bird I spotted — a greenish black blob I could see jumping about on the peepul tree outside.

By God! It was like suddenly coming face to face with a clown. A bird clown. The dumpy green chap (about the size of a sparrow) that sprang into view had a bright crimson forehead and breast, a lemon yellow throat and a streaky-looking greenish yellow tummy. It also had large dark eyes, a stout bill and a bristly moustache. Suddenly, to my delight, it sort of stood up on tiptoe and emitted a hiccup — 'tuk!'. This was followed by a series of perfectly timed hiccups, 'tuk . . . tuk . . . tuk', which also sounded a bit like the sound pips on All India Radio just before the news.

When I looked up the bird in Salim Ali's *Book of Indian Birds*, I found that it was called the **CRIMSONBREASTED BARBET** or **COPPERSMITH** because its 'tuk . . . tuk . . . tuk' hiccups also sounded like a coppersmith beating the metal with a hammer. It was a summer-loving bird whose diet was chiefly figs (especially of peepul and banyan) and other fruit. It is now called the **COPPERSMITH BARBET**.

Delhi is full of coppersmiths and at the beginning of summer they all start hiccuping from the treetops. With their big chisel-like beaks they make perfectly round little holes in the branches of trees (especially dead trees) and excavate tunnels in which they nest.



A relative of the coppersmith who also expresses joy at the coming of summer, is the **LARGE GREEN BARBET**, now renamed **BROWNFACED BARBET**. It is about the size of a babbler, grass green in colour, with a brown head, neck and shoulders which are streaked with white. It has a papaya yellow patch of bare skin around the eye and a large stout bill, rather like a small dagger, as also a moustache. Frankly, the expression on its face makes me think it's a bit of an idiot.

The green barbet is a very difficult bird to spot because it merges so beautifully with the foliage and prefers to spend most of its time up in the leafy reaches of peepul and banyan trees, hogging figs. Time and again I have found myself staring up at the branches knowing full well that the bird is somewhere there but being unable to spot it, until it suddenly dives off a branch and flies away in its typical dip-flap-glide-dip-flap-glide manner. Yes, while it may look like a buffoon, it sure knows how to make you feel like one!

Although it may be difficult to spot green barbets, it's certainly not difficult to know that they're around: in fact they make pretty sure that you do! All through summer, parks, gardens, woodlands resound to their loud 'krr-r-r-r-kutruk-kutruk-kutruk-kutroo-kutroo-kutroo' calls that go on and on. Green barbets also excavate holes in tree trunks.

Ah, yes, just how did I become interested in birds after all? Well, after I saw that coppersmith I began wondering. The very first bird I had seen looked like a clown. There were around 1300 different types of birds in the country. What did they look like?

I'm still finding out.

COPPERSMITHS found all over India **NEST** February-April **LAY** 3 eggs **BOTH PARENTS** rear the chicks
GREEN BARBETS found all over India **NEST** February-June **LAY** 2-4 eggs **BOTH PARENTS** rear the chicks



large green barbet

a Firework in the swimming pool



whitebreasted kingfisher

The kingfisher sat with a grin,
Clad in turquoise and chocolate satin.
He was waiting agog,
For some juicy frog,
To spear and begin to bash in.

I was sitting in the balcony of our flat in Goa, listening to Mad Mozart the magpie robin perform his early morning flute concert, when a movement in the garden below caught my eye. Perched on the railing of the swimming pool was a **WHITEBREASTED KINGFISHER** — now called **WHITETHROATED** — looking at the calm blue waters with a wolfish grin on its face. Suddenly, it dived off its perch and straight into the pool with a sploosh. It was out again in a flash and flew up onto the water tank on the terrace. Feeling thoroughly refreshed, it shook the sparkling water off its plumage and whizzed off into the surrounding coconut grove with a cackle of glee. Over the next few days I discovered that this kingfisher was a regular visitor to the pool and liked to start its day with a cooling dip.

It was, I thought idly, a swimming pool bird dressed in swimming pool colours. Its back was a brilliant turquoise blue but, like the waters of the pool, could change colour depending on how the sunlight fell upon it. Sometimes it appeared as blue as the sky, sometimes as blue as a spark struck by a flint, and sometimes peppermint green! Its head, neck and underparts were milk-chocolate brown, its breast, throat and chin dazzling white (as was the patch on its wings), and its powerful dagger-like bill, bright red. It had a wicked glitter in its eye and would explode off its perch with a laughing cackle, like some vivid blue firework bird.

Because of their bright colours, whitebreasted kingfishers appear to be everyone's favourite bird and can surprise you in places that are far away from water. This is because, apart from fish, frogs and tadpoles, they are quite happy living on large insects, lizards and baby birds.

There is one kingfisher who lives in the cemetery next door and often perches on the trees next to the wall. In winter it had taken to sitting on top of a telephone pole outside



the balcony at around lunch time every day, dangling its tail and bobbing its head and grinning like a schoolboy. I used to wait for it to turn up but never offered it lunch because I wasn't having roasted lizards or crispy grasshoppers! But it did seem that some birds, like some of us, were creatures of habit and liked following a fixed daily routine.

I managed to photograph a kingfisher once just as it took off from its perch on a television cable and was amazed by the picture. The bird had been doing a backward somersault — too fast for the naked eye to catch, but frozen by the camera! Its wings pointed downwards, but its beak pointed straight up at the sky. What a take-off!

Kingfishers like high-up perches and telegraph wires, and keep watch for their prey from these. They will defend their territory fiercely from each other. Their song, if you can call it that, is a loud, shrill 'kililili' that carries a long way. They nest in summer, excavating horizontal tunnels in the walls of dry nallahs or earth banks.

KINGFISHERS found in plains and hills all over India **NEST** March-July **LAY** 4-7 roundish white eggs **BOTH PARENTS** rear the chicks

One tough nut



The woodpecker tapped on the tree,
 "Won't you come out and play with me?
 I'm a handsome young fellow,
 In red, golden-yellow,"
 But the beetle fled very quickly.

Often we think that insects look like scary monsters from outer space and that birds are beautiful, colourful and altogether wonderful. Well, if you were a beetle living in a tree that grew in a park or forest where woodpeckers abounded, you'd think very differently!

Imagine your plight: you're sitting comfortably in a niche in the tree trunk, chewing on a bit of delicious bark, when you hear a harsh gleeful cackle of laughter that can only belong to a creature that is dangerously mad. Then, there is a sudden WHUMP! nearby

goldenbacked woodpecker

which sets your heart thumping, followed by what sounds like several cannon shells exploding around you in rapid succession THUD! THUDTHUDTHUD!! (To our human ears it sounds like a harmless tap-tapping.) Suddenly there are splinters of bark flying everywhere and your home is being shattered to pieces! You scuttle out — and freeeeze! There's a gigantic black spike poised right above you, glinting in the sun. Attached to a bird with a bright crimson crest and glittering black eyes, it is the size of a small hill! The spike crashes down! If you're a nimble beetle, you might still have got away. If not, you're the woodpecker's breakfast!

I've often seen **GOLDENBACKED WOODPECKERS** embark on such beetle hunts in the trees in the cemetery, and frankly (no matter what the beetles might think) they are quite beautiful birds. Their backs are black and pure gold ("Ah," the beetles would sneer, "trust human beings to fall for anything that is golden — they haven't learnt anything from King Midas!"), their breasts greyish white with black streaks, and they wear a crimson crest that looks like a bottlebrush flower. As for that mad cackling laugh, well it fills me with a wild kind of joy — like you sometimes feel before a thunderstorm. But yes, that bill is indeed like a great iron spike.

You would think — and beetles would hope — that any bird that spends its day hammering its bill against solid wood would end up with a pretty bad headache, but no! The skulls of woodpeckers are specially designed to absorb the repeated shock of hammering, so they never need aspirins. They really are tough nuts! They also have two (of four) toes facing backwards, which helps them stand upright on vertical tree trunks, propped up further by their stiff tails. Typically, they will clamp on to a tree trunk and hitch their way up it in jerky spurts, tapping-pausing-cocking their heads to listen for the sound of scurrying beetle feet, backing down a bit just to recheck, then up again like someone climbing a spiral staircase. Actually, they are quite shy and if they spot you watching them, will scuttle to the far side of the trunk, and maybe peer at you round the corner. Or else, they'll be off through the trees, flapping, pausing and dipping in wavy flight. Apart from beetles, goldenbacked woodpeckers also eat large quantities of ants, other insects, as well as ripe fruit and flower nectar. They nest in the hollows of trees.

Recently they have been renamed **BLACKRUMPED FLAMEBACKS**. Now, try and say that fast! Blackrumped flameback, blackrumpedflamebackblackrumpedflamebackblackrumped flamebackblackrumpedflameback!

GOLDENBACKED WOODPECKERS found all over India **NEST** February-July **LAY** 3 eggs **BOTH PARENTS** raise the chicks



The baby stinkbombers

A hoopoe once told her sweet laddie,
"I hope you will now be happy,
For your daddy and me
Have decided you see,
To never ever change your nappy!"



The young villain, out on the prowl for baby birds, spots a promising-looking hollow halfway up the trunk of a tree.

A nest-hole most likely and who knew what exotic or beautiful baby birds lay inside? He might get a fat price for the chicks in the market. His eyes gleam and his fingers itch. He shins up the tree with ease. As he approaches the hollow, he screws up his nose; there is a horrible smell in the air. He climbs on and, balancing very carefully, inserts one long greedy arm inside the hollow. His fingers close around several small soft bodies but suddenly he's wishing he could close his nose instead. Inside, something squishes and spurts yuckily into his hand and halfway up his arm. With a yell, he lets go and yanks it out, slimy and stinking to high heavens. It's as if several little feathery stinkbombs have gone off in his hand and all he wants to do now is to get down this tree and wash his hand and arm.

Yesss! The baby hoopoe stinkbombers have scored a direct hit!

But really, who could think that a bird as neat and civilised-looking as the **HOOPOE** could use such a foul means of defending itself — even while very young? Hoopoes are dressed in fawn coloured plumage and have that neat zebra striping on their backs, wings and tail. And that lovely fawn crest, tipped with black and white and so like a silken Japanese hand fan, when opened. The bill is long and slender and slightly curved and, when ajar, looks like a pair of forceps. When the crest is folded up, the bird's head looks like a small pickaxe.

Hoopoes like waddling about on lawns, probing the turf with their bills for insects and grubs, as though they were gardening. They're sometimes mistaken for woodpeckers. I see them often on the lawn, but approach too close and off they go, fluttering their broad striped wings rather in the manner of butterflies. Sometimes I hear them calling from the trees — a soft, musical-sounding 'hoo-po! hoo-po-po!' (no prizes for guessing

how they got their name!) that carries quite a long way. But it is surprisingly difficult to pinpoint exactly where the bird is calling from.

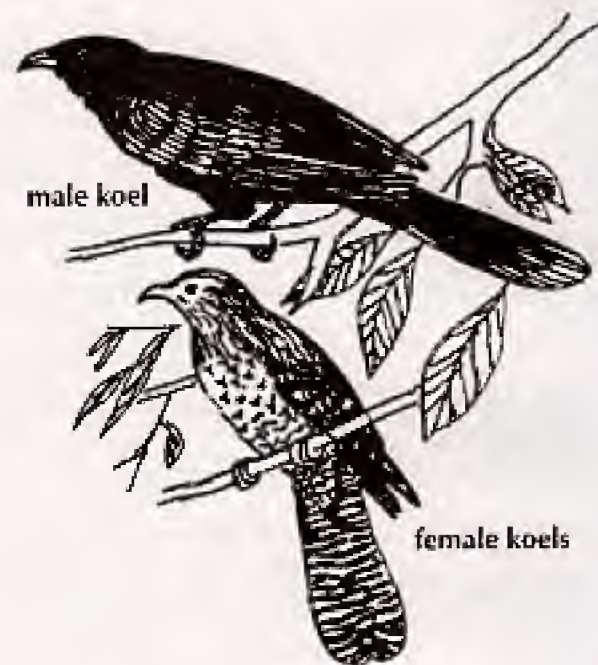
Hoopoes breed in summer and the female purposely keeps their home filthy and stinking to keep predators away. With five or six little stinkbomb hoopoes crouched inside, ready to go off, I guess she really needn't worry!

HOOPOES found all over India **NEST** March-June **LAY** 5-6 eggs **BOTH PARENTS** rear the chicks



Cuckoos all

The brainfever bird is no fun,
As you scramble about in the sun.
It'll hide where it's cool,
And call you a fool,
Till you wish you had an airgun!



Just imagine you are a crow — the toughest, meanest, smartest scoundrel in the bird kingdom. You can make life miserable for wise old owls and will not hesitate to pull the tails of those haughty powerful eagles who fly around as though they own the world. Lesser birds tremble before you and beg you not to harm their young ones. Yes, you have the power! And then, very early one morning in the beginning of summer, you hear that call ringing through the still-dark trees: 'uruk-keookeoo-keoo!! kuoo-kuoo-kuoo!' Rising in shrillness and then bubbling over with lunatic excitement.

You know at once: the KOELS are back! And suddenly you don't feel like the toughest, meanest, smartest scoundrel in the bird kingdom any more. You feel nervous and upser and uneasy. Then, horror of horrors, you spot one! Just a bulging crimson eye at first, glaring at you through the leaves. Cheekily the wretched bird flutters into view — it is glossy black from head to tail, long and slim at the waist, with a greenish yellow bill and those horrible crimson eyes. With a hoarse 'caw!' you and your mate give chase, even as a voice deep inside you says, "No, no, no! This is not the right thing to do! Come back, come back, come back!"



Because, back at the nest, a wicked deed is being done. The female koel, hiding nearby and cunningly camouflaged in her profusely spotted and barred dark brown plumage, has flitted over and thrown out some of your precious sea blue eggs and replaced them with her own, which are very similar. She flits away, looking like a dappled branch, and gives the all clear to her husband, still leading you and your mate a merry dance through the trees . . .

I've often seen koels being chased by crows in the cemetery, and the slinky devils certainly appear to enjoy it as they swerve between the trees in swashbuckling style. But I've never managed to see the female koel do her bit of mischief. I've often wondered why koels — and other cuckoos — don't nest like ordinary decent birds and bring up their own young. Are they lazy? Do they just want to have fun all the time and take no responsibility? Don't they care about their own babies? Are they trying to control the population of crows? Or do they think that crows will do a better job of bringing up their chicks than they themselves?

At any rate, their chicks don't appear to mind having crows as their foster parents. They hatch before the genuine crow babies do, and so, being bigger, are able to bully them and get the lion's share of the food their loving — and ignorant — foster parents bring them. Indeed, the genuine crow chicks usually starve to death. Also, the female koel chicks that hatch do not look like their mother who was brown, spotted and barred with white. They look like their brothers — coal black all over — because otherwise their foster parents would realise that some hankypanky had taken place in their nest. The real mother of the koel chicks doesn't, however, totally abandon her young and has been seen feeding them after they have left the crow's nest.

Koels are found all over the country, in fact, wherever there are crows! They stay up in the leafy reaches of big trees, plotting their mischief and eating fruit and berries and insects. Their excitable 'kuoo-kuoo-kuoo!' calls are a familiar sound in gardens and parks especially during the hot weather.

While you may feel that their behaviour leaves a lot to be desired, I suppose it is nice to know that there is at least one bird that gets the better of that street-smart devil, the house crow!



common hawk-cuckoo

The BRAINFEVER BIRD or COMMON HAWK-CUCKOO is, I think, a complete nuisance. First of all, it disguises itself as — and even flies like — the shikra (*see page 61*), which is one of my all-time favourite birds. So, when you catch a glimpse of this

fellow, dashing between the trees like a fugitive, you think, "Wow! Shikra! Must follow it!" Off you go, tramping through the spiky bushes and undergrowth, staring hopefully up at the trees, eyes popping. Of course, there is no shikra anywhere. Soon you are hot, tired, sweaty and irritated. Just then, from deep within the cool green shade of a towering peepul tree, a mocking call rings out: 'Brain fever! Brain fever! Brain fever!' Of course you have brain fever: after all you've been looking for a non-existent shikra in the midsummer heat for half an hour now and that wretched cuckoo, chilling out in the shade, is pointing this out to you loud and clear! Grrr . . . !

It's not entirely your fault because the brainfever bird does look a lot like the shikra. It is about pigeon-sized but slimmer and has the same ashy grey plumage and rusty woven pattern on its whitish breast as does the hawk. But its head is more like a pigeon's, its beak is weak and its orange-ringed eyes are wild and staring and mad-looking.

In Hindi, the bird's rude call has been written down as a much more civilised, 'pee-kahan?' which means, 'Where is my love?', whereas in Marathi, this is written as 'paos ala!' which means, 'rain is coming!' Much better than brain fever!

Brainfever birds lay their eggs in the nest of babblers who duly and lovingly raise their chicks. They eat fruit, berries and — lick your lips! — hairy caterpillars!

Actually, most cuckoos tend to appear a little mad and sad — as though they're baffled by something but can't remember what. The **PIEDCRESTED CUCKOO**, now simply called the **PIED CUCKOO**, looks mad all right, but is one happy-go-lucky bird and certainly not a doleful one. It is dressed like a bulbul in a dinner jacket — black above, white below, with white patches on black wings and white tips to its extra long black tail. It has a wild, untidy black crest, glittering black eyes and a maniacal metallic call that goes, 'piu . . . piu . . . pee-pee-piu, pee-pee-piu!' and which somehow, always makes you feel a little happy-go-lucky and mad too!



piedcrested cuckoo

In North India, the piedcrested cuckoo is a monsoon visitor and one reason why we feel happy and mad when we hear it is because it means that the rains are about to break. It is said that piedcrested cuckoos fly all the way from East Africa to spend the monsoon with us, but this still has to be scientifically proved. In the south, the bird is a resident, so its antics may be observed all throughout the year.

And what antics they are! I've often seen these crazy birds flying around in the cemetery, calling wildly and chasing each other between the trees like Indian film stars.



At first, four or five of them will run a merry dance together, then it is usually the male chasing the female around the trees, flaring his tail and clapping his wings.

Like other cuckoos, the piedcrested cuckoo lays its eggs in the nest of other birds (usually babblers). They too have a special liking for hairy caterpillars.

“Wake up! Wake up! It’s come, it’s come!” I groaned and looked at my watch. It was 3 p.m. on a hot sultry afternoon in Goa and I wanted to sleep. But Divya and Abhishek (my niece and nephew) were at the doorway, jumping up and down with excitement. I grabbed the camera and staggered out to the balcony.

Down below, in the neighbour’s compound, a huge crow-like bird was hopping around furtively. It was coal black, but had glossy, russet, cloak-like wings, and (like the koel) bulging crimson eyes that looked like globules of blood. It was the **CROW PHEASANT**, one strange and scary bird, and this one was quietly visiting the neighbour’s garden every afternoon when everyone was asleep.

Before I could adjust the camera, it had spotted us and hopped into the thick undergrowth. Crow pheasants were, I knew, skulking, secretive birds who searched bushes and undergrowth for birds’ nests, for they ate baby birds and eggs, as well as large insects, lizards, tender young mice and snails. And at twilight, they tend to call each other in hollow, blood-curdling voices, ‘coup-coup-coup-coup!’, which can be quite scary if you’re walking through a dark, tree-shadowed park or garden. While crow pheasants belong to the cuckoo family, they do not lay their eggs in the nests of other birds like normal cuckoos. (I told you, they were strange birds!)

KOELS found all over India **NEST** April-August **LAY** well, as many as 13 eggs have been found in one crow’s nest
CROWS rear the chicks

BRAINFEVER BIRDS found all over India **NEST** March-June **LAY** 1 egg in babbler’s nest **BABBLERS** rear the chicks

PIED CUCKOOS found all over India **NEST** June-August **LAY** usually 1 egg in babbler’s nest **BABBLERS** bring up young

CROW PHEASANTS found all over India **NEST** February-September in huge, untidy, globular edifice made of twigs and so on with a side entrance **LAY** 3-4 eggs **BOTH PARENTS** raise their chicks (and eat those of other birds)



Do bee-eaters eat bees?

They sail and they skate in the sky,
And tinkle and trill from up high,
Bee-eaters are entrancing,
And like figure-dancing,
And snapping up poor dragonflies!

Every year, around March and September, the **GREEN BEE-EATERS** arrive over the cemetery skies and perform their graceful aerial ballets. From branches high up on the tamarind tree they set after the glittering dragonflies, snapping them up deftly in their slender, slightly curved black bills and gliding back to their perches on taut, triangular-pointed wings. A little larger than sparrows, these slim, attractive birds are green as elves, with shiny rufous orange heads (as though they had applied henna or 'mehendi'), turquoise blue cheeks, and black marks across orange brown eyes. The two central feathers in their tail stick out like a pair of pins. They trill musically as they launch their flights and sallies, 'tree-tree-tree!' or 'trip-trip-trip!' and sound like so many silver bells tinkling in the sky.



Ah, but now to the big question: do bee-eaters eat bees? Well, actually they first bee-eat (beat!) them and then eat them! Bees, wasps, termites, dragonflies and such winged insects are bashed up thoroughly against a branch before being eaten. I suppose it is the only way that something as spiky as a dragonfly can be swallowed without it getting stuck in the throat like a fishbone.

Bee-eaters like open country with wide skies and are fond of perching on telegraph wires and telephone poles. They nest in summer, digging horizontal tunnels into sandbanks. I often wish that bee-eaters would remain here all the year round and wonder where they go during most of the year. Probably to places where the weather is better and there are more insects in the sky to be caught and bee-eaten!

GREEN BEE-EATERS found all over India **NEST** February-June **LAY** 4-7 eggs **BOTH PARENTS** rear the chicks



Those charming ugly ducklings

A hornbill once came to the cemetery,
And offered his love a neem berry.
She took it with grace,
And a sweet smiling face,
As though it was emerald jewellery.



When you see them for the first time, you may think **GREY HORNIBILLS** are big, ugly duckling birds who never turned into beautiful swans or, well, beautiful hornbills. They're large (about kite-sized) brownish grey birds who have this enormous curving heavy bill with a strange pointed protuberance (called a casque) on top, and a long dangly tail that looks like it is about to drop off. Altogether rather untidy and clumsy-looking birds, they remind me of creatures belonging to the dinosaur days. But actually, they're perfectly charming.

One morning in March, a pair of them flew over to the cemetery, probably from the Qudsia Gardens across the road. They sat side by side on the branch of a neem tree, dangling their tails nonchalantly. Then the male leaned forward and very delicately plucked a single neem berry, using his huge bill like a pair of pincers. He cocked his head this way and that, a humorous glint in his eyes, and then shuffled sideways towards his girlfriend who looked like a very prim and proper miss. He offered her the neem berry as though it were an emerald of great value and was obviously delighted when she accepted it. Immediately he set about plucking all the neem berries within reach and even some that were almost too far away, because he nearly toppled over while trying to reach them. Eventually the happy pair flew off in their usual dipping manner — flapping hurriedly and then gliding with wing-tips curled upwards — uttering their strange, metallic, kite-like squeals, 'whee-whee'.

In all probability they would now find themselves a hollow in the trunk or branch of a tree and the female would settle down inside this and lay her eggs. Using her excreta (ugh!) she would seal up the entrance hole from inside, while her husband did the same from the outside using mud and his strange bill as a trowel. A slit would be left through which he would feed her with the wild figs hornbills so love, as well as small animals like

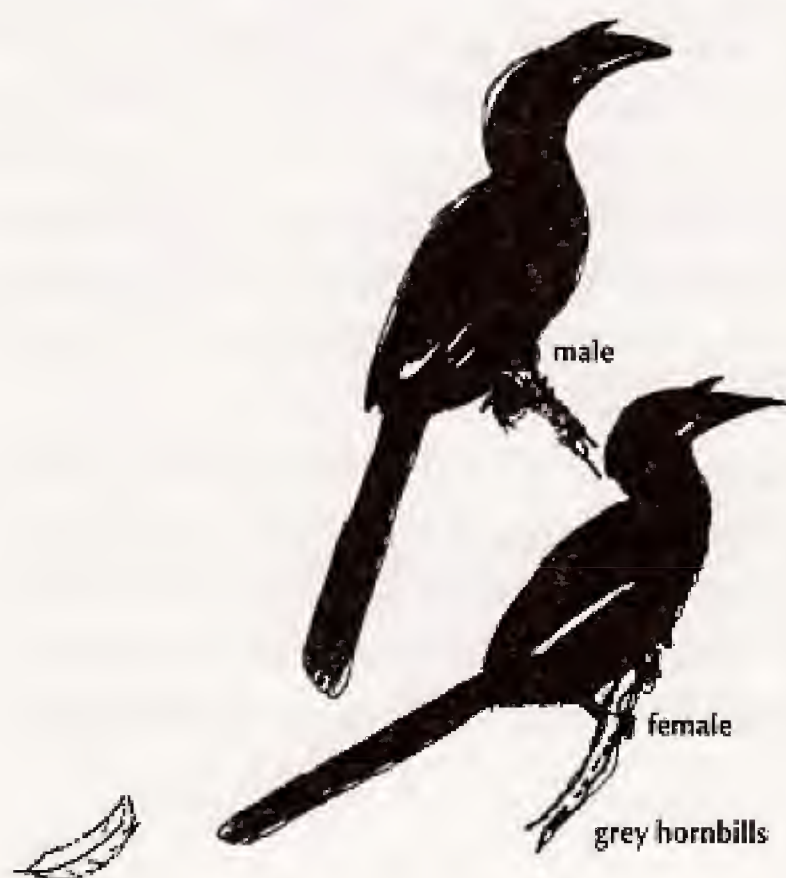
mice and lizards. She would remain in her prison-cum-nursery until the eggs hatched, after which she would break out. Again, the entrance would be sealed up, this time by her chicks inside, and now both parents would feed their young through the slit. The chicks would break out when they were big and old enough to look after themselves. Well, almost . . .

. . . One afternoon, I entered my room to find, to my great delight, a grey hornbill perched on the small 'mitha neem' tree just outside the balcony. Quickly I shut the room door so that Wag would not charge out on to the balcony, barking and growling. When I went to the balcony myself, I saw that there were two hornbills on the tree, and now the first one had spread open its wings, flared its tail and was begging for a snack from the other. It was clearly a fledgling that had only recently left its hollow and was still demanding to be spoon-fed! The adult just looked at it with the usual hornbill expression of comic affection and flew off, much to the youngster's wild-eyed indignation. I was hoping it would throw a first class tantrum but it did not.

Grey hornbills are found all over the country in large rambling gardens, tree-lined avenues, groves and open well-wooded country and they prefer staying up in the trees. Delhi has plenty of them thanks to all its lovely old trees and I often hear them squealing in the trees above while waiting for traffic lights to change at intersections.

Sadly, it is foolishly and incorrectly believed that eating these comical, ugly duckling birds can cure you of various diseases, so they are hunted and turned into soup.

HORNBILLS found all over India **NEST** March-June **LAY** 2-3 eggs **BOTH PARENTS** rear the chicks





grey partridge

Bhrrr! Yaaa! Thud! Ooof!

The partridge sits tight on the ground,
When it knows that you are around.
But as you get louder,
It'll explode like gunpowder,
You'll faint with that sudden sound!

I was out birdwatching on Delhi's great rambling Ridge near my house and something had just caught my eye in the spiky, tawny foliage ahead. Cautiously, I scrambled over the hot rocks and through the tangled undergrowth as burrs with sharp fish-hook talons tried to yank me back. An acacia thorn speared right through my shoe, stabbing my heel, and I winced. But I remained silent and inched forward. The unknown flickering bird was in the clearing just ahead. A couple more steps and I should get a clear view of it . . .

BHHRRRRR!! YAAA! THUDD! OOOOF!

I found myself spreadeagled on the rocks, my heart pounding! Some bird bomb had gone off right under my feet, giving me the fright of my life. I had caught a glimpse of blurring russet brown wings and fanned out tail, whirring off at top speed from the scene of the crime. (Of course, the unknown flickering bird would have fled too.)

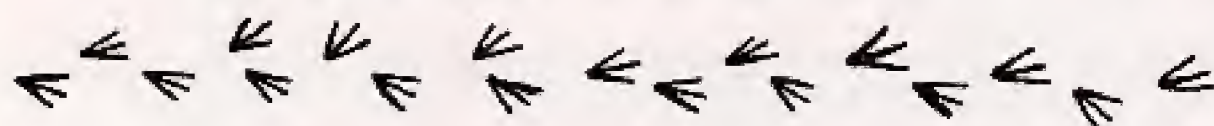
Welcome to the **GREY PARTRIDGE** — and be warned! It can scare the pants off you while you walk innocently in rambling parks and scrubby countryside virtually anywhere in India! It seems to like nothing better (like an irritating kid brother or sister) than to jump out and scare you when you least expect it. But actually you have scared the bird as much as it has scared you. It sits tight on the ground, virtually invisible until you almost step on it, before making its mad dash to safety.

Pray what does this crazy bird bomb look like? A stumpy half-grown hen (I ask you!), grey brown in colour, blotched with buff above, and wavy patterned in black below, with the tell-tale stubby russet tail and a broken black necklace on its rufous throat. It saunters about in jaunty fashion, in groups of six or more, in scrub jungle, eating whatever it finds — grains, seed, berries, insects and so on. Occasionally it will stand up on tiptoe and call in shrill ringing tones, 'kateetar! kateetar! kateetar!' or 'pateela! pateela! pateela!' to announce its claim to its territory.

There is a group of them living in the cemetery next door and occasionally I see them go out for their morning or evening walks. Partridges roost in trees, so, especially early in the morning, can ambush you from above too! They seem to prefer sprinting to flying, though when they do take to their wings, they do so as though they are powered by gunpowder! Male partridges have sharp spurs on their legs and are big fighters and we encourage them further by organising partridge fights between champion birds (though this is illegal). They're also regarded as being very good to eat and are trapped and hunted in large numbers. They nest in the undergrowth. Recently their name has been changed to GREY FRANCOLIN.

P.S. The Ridge forms the tail end of the Aravalli mountains, and enters Delhi from the south, tapering off at the Yamuna in north Delhi. The New Delhi (or central) and Northern Ridges were actually barren, rocky badlands supporting harsh scrub and semi-desert vegetation. Both sections were afforested by the British after the rebellion of 1857, though more purposefully after the turn of the century. Today, they form the 'green lungs' of Delhi.

GREY PARTRIDGES found all over India NEST March-September LAY 4-8 eggs CHICKS take care of themselves



Dancers in the cemetery

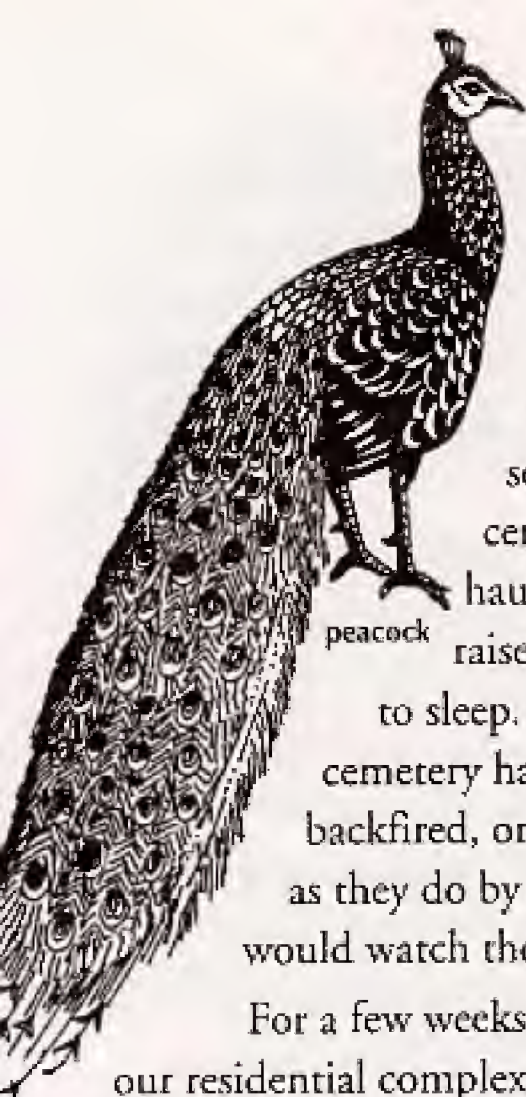
The peacock is our National Bird,
All over the world it is revered,
But this beautiful dancer,
And proud dark blue prancer,
Should only be seen and not heard!



'May-yew! May-yew! May-yew!
'Kaa-an! Kaa-an! Kaa-an!'

I woke with a start and peered blearily at the clock. 2 a.m. 2 a.m! And it seemed like all the peafowl in India were screaming their heads off in the moonlit cemetery next door. Had they gone crazy or something? National birds should know better than to wake up





the entire neighbourhood in the middle of the night. But, hold it! **PEAFOWL**, I knew, were excellent guards. With exceptionally sharp eyesight and hearing, they were the first to warn the creatures of the jungle of the presence of a tiger. And they had been used by the authorities to guard the compounds of top security prisons. So, was there someone prowling about in the cemetery next door? A couple of ghosts perhaps, out for a spell of haunting on this silver, full moon night? At the foot of my bed, Wag raised his head, furrowed his brow, and then, with a sigh, settled back to sleep. Nothing to worry about then. Perhaps one of the monkeys in the cemetery had disturbed the peafowl. Or maybe a late-night autorickshaw had backfired, or a tyre had burst. Silly city peafowl get as excited by these noises as they do by grand thunderstorms. Tomorrow, I thought sleepily, tomorrow I would watch them dance . . .

For a few weeks early this summer, the cemetery **PEACOCKS** had flown over into our residential complex every morning and had danced in the big common lawn so that all the residents could enjoy the spectacle as they sipped their morning cups of tea. Personally, however, I preferred watching them dance in the cemetery itself because it was so much more picturesque and dramatic.

Here, for a stage they would use a high cement platform that had been built over a well. From this high position, the gorgeous males could be sure that they were seen and admired by all the peahens. The star male would fly onto his stage and with a magnificent sweeping motion, unfurl his beautiful train. Framed by neem leaves which glittered like jagged emeralds all around him, he made a breathtaking sight. He would shimmer his great fan so that it made an exciting hissing sound, blurring the dark eyespots hypnotically, his russet wings quivering at his side. Often, a peahen would join him on the stage and he would dance excitedly before her, his large dark eyes glowing, while she pretended to be not at all interested. Sometimes he would dance all day — with a few breaks of course — but right from the morning till the evening.

But no, not every peacock in the cemetery is allowed to dance on the stage. There are four peacocks, of whom three have the fully grown train. As the monsoons approach, these three will duel with each other to see which of them has the right to use the stage. In addition there are seven or eight peahens and even they will fight each other to decide which of them is the seniormost wife and allowed to go on stage with the male.

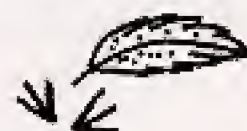
It is always exciting to watch the males duel in the cemetery. With their gorgeous

cloaks swishing behind them, they remind me of characters in Alexander Dumas' book, *The Three Musketeers*. They face up to one another, throats trembling with emotion, and suddenly, with a challenging cry, fly at each other, claws extended. But it's all mostly bluff because they rarely make contact. After landing they'll swing around for the next round. Eventually one bird decides that he's had enough and flees between the tombstones, pursued by the victor crowing with triumph.

After the monsoons, the peacocks shed their finery in order to grow a new train. But eager young males will often begin to show off even with very small fans and look quite comical doing so. The peahens, of course, are not at all impressed by this ridiculous display.

Peahens normally nest in a scrape in the ground in wild undergrowth — which is why it is so important to leave the undergrowth tangled and uncut in parks and large gardens. But as the birds are not normally harmed by people, they may also choose to nest on the terraces of houses or parapets of buildings. A couple of years ago, I was shown the 'nest' of a peahen in a window box on the terrace of a nearby apartment. Unfortunately, the owners of the apartment had dogs and they scared away the peahen. But after every monsoon I have seen sprightly parties of peafowl chicks sauntering after their mother in the cemetery, so there are many happy endings after all. Peafowl eat seed, berries and grain (and can damage farmers' fields) as well as small animals, frogs and even snakes.

PEAFOWL found all over India NEST January-October LAY 4-6 eggs BOTH PARENTS rear the chicks



The bird that welcomed me to Delhi

The redstart will never make you wait,
As it sits on your garden gate
One day in September,
And you will remember
That yes, it did have a date!

It's always difficult when you move into a new big city because everything seems to be so different and strange and unfriendly. When we moved to Delhi, many years ago, we





initially stayed in the house of a relative — a dark, gloomy, ground-floor flat, with a dark, gloomy garden shaded by a dark, gloomy tree. Then one morning, I looked out of the window and saw a slim, coal black bird, a bit larger than a sparrow, with an autumn-leaf coloured tummy and tail and ash grey crown, perched on the garden wall. It looked at me out of inquiring black eyes and then bowed and vibrated its tail. Then bowed pertly again — and again and again! And I thought, “Hey, at least this little

fellow is friendly!” He was, I discovered, the **BLACK REDSTART** and, oddly enough, not a native of the city himself. He spent the summers up in the Himalayas — and some of his kind spread further north, across Central Asia, all the way up to Mongolia. Only the winters — well, from around September to April — were spent in the plains of India, in open, rocky, scrubby country, groves of trees, and gardens — even dark and gloomy ones in cities like Delhi! His wife, I discovered, looked quite different — she was biscuit brown all over, had large dark eyes, and only her autumn-tinted tail was similar to her husband’s.

I now meet black redstarts every year and am always amazed at how punctual they are in their comings and goings. One fellow used to turn up on the lawn at the end of September every year, and the redstarts that inhabit the Ridge nearby all seem to book their flight back to the hills on or around the 24th of April every year!

Another thing I noticed about them was that each bird was very particular about keeping others of its kind away from the territory it had claimed for itself. On the Ridge, three or four of them had divided up a large area between themselves, and woe betide any bird that dared to cross the border!

Redstarts like to perch on low branches or boulders or walls, from where they flit after insects, uttering a sharp ‘tsip’ or ‘tuc-tuc’ or ‘tititic’ call. They breed in summer in the high plains of Tibet, right across Central Asia up to Mongolia, and build untidy nests under large stones on the ground, or in walls or rock crevices.

It really is astonishing that something so small can fly so many hundreds, even thousands of miles over mountains, forests, rivers, fields, villages and towns to land up in your small garden, punctually every year, on practically the same date. I think we should be the ones bowing to redstarts, not the other way around!

BLACK REDSTARTS found all over India in winter **NEST** May-August in Kashmir **LAY** 3-6 eggs **BOTH PARENTS** rear the chicks

Wiggle-waggle's first big flight



white wagtail

The wagtail had an adventurous flight,
Over mountains and plains at night,
Navigating by stars,
And magnetic bars,
And arriving safely all right!

"Oh no! I've put on so much weight!" groaned Wiggle-Waggle, the WHITE WAGTAIL somewhere in the wild steppes of Central Asia, where the wind had already begun to howl about winter. "I'll have to go on a crash diet straightaway!"

"You'll do no such thing!" snapped Wagga-Wagga, her friend. "And you'd better start eating again. You need to store as much fat as you can for the journey ahead."

"I feel all lumpy," complained Wiggle-Waggle, and she was right. The fat had accumulated in her body in little balls. She and Wagga-Wagga were a pair of white wagtails who lived in Central Asia and were now preparing for their momentous migratory journey south, to warmer climes. They were about the size of bulbuls, sprightly black, white and grey birds with long tails that wagged up and down nearly all the time.

Wiggle-Waggle had never made the journey before and was understandably nervous. Wagga-Wagga was a veteran traveller who had done this trip several times.

"Why can't we stay here in winter?" asked Wiggle-Waggle, her tail flicking up and down. "If all the other birds go away, we'll have the whole of Central Asia to ourselves!"

"Don't be silly. It freezes over completely here. You won't find a single insect to eat. And you'll be blown away by the ferocious storm winds."

"When do we leave?"

"Well, in a couple of days or so, I should think. And yes, we take off at night."

"At night?!" squeaked Wiggle-Waggle horrified. "Why at night? Why not during the day when we can see where we're going?"

"Because it's not safe for small birds like ourselves to fly by day. Only big birds like the eagles and geese and cranes migrate by day."



"But . . . but how will we find our way in the dark?"

"Oh, don't worry, Wiggly. We set our course by looking at star patterns. Also, there are certain forces generated by the earth — its force of gravity and its magnetic force — which tell us in which direction to fly."

"What's magnetic force?" asked Wiggle-Waggle, puzzled.

"Well, the earth is like one huge magnet. When you sprinkle iron filings around a magnet they form a distinct pattern and arrangement around it. These show the magnetic force. Similarly, there are patterns like that running right around the globe from the north pole to the south pole. And they help tell us in which direction to fly."

"Wow! It all sounds so difficult and complicated," said Wiggle-Waggle.

Wagga-Wagga tapped her tiny round head. "Don't worry," he said. "It's all up there. In your tiny bird brain! It's better than any computer!"

Two nights later, they flew in the company of a large flock — because it was safer to do so that way. Wagga-Wagga climbed to about 500 metres and set course southwards. All through the dark, starlit night they flew, keeping to a speed of around 50 kmph. Then, as the eastern horizon paled, they landed in a large field to rest and feed. At last, after several nights of non-stop flying, they saw the silver and midnight blue mountains rearing up in the dim starlight. Looking insurmountable. The mighty Himalayas.

"Oh my!" gasped Wiggle-Waggle. "How do we get past those? They seem to be higher than we can fly. Higher than the very sky!"

"Yes," grunted Wagga-Wagga. "Had we been geese or eagles or cranes we might have been able to fly right over them. But see that broad silver river down there? That's the mighty Indus. We fly along its valleys, through the mountains. Another way through the mountains is through the valleys of the great Brahmaputra river on the eastern side of the mountains."

"Wow!" said Wiggle-Waggle, impressed. "You know everything!"

And so they continued their journey. Sadly, many of their companions didn't make it. Some fell ill with fatigue, some were taken by wild cats and owls, some got confused by lights put up by humans — especially on cloudy and misty nights — and were caught in nets or smacked down by long bamboo poles. Others were shot by hunters.

"Where exactly are we heading?" asked Wiggle-Waggle. "And when will we get there?" She was getting a bit tired of the journey.

"There's a nice little garden in Delhi that I stay in," said Wagga-Wagga. "With an

empty one next door where you can stay.”

And so, one morning in mid-September, I found Wagga-Wagga trundling about on the lawn outside, darting hither and thither, picking up insects, and wagging his tail in a satisfied manner. I was thankful that he had made the journey safely. Then of course, Wag saw him and went charging out, barking. Wagga-Wagga flew off with a squeaky ‘chilcheep’ and joined Wiggle-Waggle in the large common lawn beyond the hedge.

“Humans!” he squeaked indignantly. “Really! They’re the limit!”

“Why, what’s the matter?”

“Just imagine! We’ve flown 6753 km from Central Asia, to land safely at last in this garden and what does that fellow do to welcome us? He sets the dog on us! And do you know what the name of that monstrous animal is? Wag! Really, it’s too much! He should be welcoming us with garlands and a band, that’s what!”

“Still, it’s quite nice here, really,” said Wiggle-Waggle. “How long do we stay here for?”

“Um . . . till about the middle of April. And yes, my dear, you’d better enjoy your holiday here. Because once we get back to Central Asia, it’s going to be work, work, work and more work. Courting, nest-building, egg-laying, incubation, and of course feeding chicks who have the appetites of elephants. You won’t have a moment to spare!”

Note: Wagtails like Wiggle-Waggle spend the winter over the entire country and are very fond of lawns, fields, golf courses, maidans — and even sports grounds where they are unmindful of any matches that may be going on. Another common wagtail that you might meet — especially trotting about on lily pads — in tanks, talaos and nallahs, is the **YELLOWHEADED WAGTAIL** which has a yellow head with a grey crown, a grey brown back and yellow tummy.

WHITE WAGTAILS found all over India in winter **NEST** May-July in Kashmir **LAY** 4-6 eggs **BOTH PARENTS** rear the chicks



Tea garden tales of paradise



paradise flycatcher

The flycatcher flaunted and fluttered,
And coy teasing calls it uttered,
At first I said, "Please,
Will you stop and say cheese?"
But evil things I had all too soon muttered.

"Oh there are some beautiful white birds flying around in the garden!" I was informed a few minutes after we had arrived at the small tea garden in Palampur for a holiday. I pricked up my ears. Beautiful white birds . . . could it be . . . could it possibly be . . . ? "They have these long white tails which look like ribbons . . ."

They were! There could be no other bird that fitted the description. None other than the one and only **PARADISE FLYCATCHER**! A bird for which birdwatchers would give anything to see . . .

A coy teasing bulbul-like whistle floated in from the lush garden outside. My ears flapped and glancing out of the window I caught a glimpse of a fairy-like bird, silvery white and black, float past. I gulped down my lunch and went out into the garden, rubbing my hands in glee: I had ten whole days in which to admire and photograph this beautiful bird. The garden, which sloped gradually from one end to the other, was part tea garden, part wild, unkempt, citrus orchard. Within minutes of stepping out, the paradise flycatcher flew enticingly past again. I could not have asked for a better welcome!

You'd think it was a bulbul dressed up by angels. It has a glossy, blue black head, topped off by a wild, jaunty crest that looks as though it's sticking up despite the application of large amounts of gel. Its black eyes are ringed with neon blue. If it is a male over four years of age, its body is silvery white and charcoal-tinged where the wings fold into the sides of the body. And — hold your breath! — its tail, also silvery white is more than 18 inches long: two beautiful ribbon-like streamers which swirl and curl dazzlingly as it flies through the foliage or sallies after insects. Mind you, only males over four years of age are silvery white. Younger males, who also have ribbons in their tails, are rufous. The female too, is rufous, but she doesn't have ribbons in her tail.

Much to my delight, I found there was a whole family of paradise flycatchers in the garden. Two splendid silver white males, two younger rufous males and one female. I couldn't sort out exactly how they were related to each other because they were always whizzing about from one end of the garden to the other. In fact, as the days went by, I began to get increasingly annoyed with these birds and their teasing pranks.

First, they would whistle me up from the house and zip enticingly past the window. I would grab my binoculars and camera and rush out into the calf-deep wet grass to find one splendid male perched picturesquely on a tree — at the far end of the garden. So, trudge trudge trudge through wet grass and bichu-buti (a horrible stinging nettle) dodging behind trees for cover. At last, close enough, I would peer out of cover only to see the wretched bird dive off its perch and sail past, calling 'weep-poor willie, weep-poor willie' as it went past. To perch again, at the other end of the garden. So trudge trudge huff puff all over again.

Sometimes, however, they did let me come quite close — only they would make sure there was a huge dark cloud, black as granite, sitting over the garden at the time, so I couldn't take any photographs. And I knew exactly what must have been going on in the minds of these vain birds: "Hah! Who does this guy think he is? Some crackshot birdwatcher from Delhi who thinks he can photograph us just like that!? Let's show him!"

As I stumbled after them in the garden, I too began harbouring dark and evil thoughts about them. You know, that story about how the paradise flycatcher came to look as it did . . .

Apparently, in its original state, the flycatcher was a plain rufous bird with a black head — which, presumably, birdwatchers didn't watch and bird photographers didn't photograph. Well, this flycatcher looked into the Garden of Eden and saw that it was full of gorgeous white birds with long white tails. (Exactly the kind of birds that birdwatchers gawped at.) He longed to be like them. So he asked the guardian angel how he could become like them. "You have to be pure — from inside and outside!" the angel informed him. "Go back to earth and see if you can achieve that."

The flycatcher came back to earth and for the next three years was a good, sweet bird that did good deeds and made everyone happy. And gradually its rufous plumage and black head turned spotless white and its tail grew long and glorious. Back it went to the guardian angel at the gates of Eden. This time the angel was so impressed he told the flycatcher to wait while he sought god's permission to allow him to enter.

Instead of waiting quietly, the silly flycatcher began showing off and boasting before the other ordinary birds. Well, god heard him and as punishment, turned his head black



again and took out all the ribbons in his tail save two. "You will go back to Earth," he commanded, "and teach the world about the virtues of being humble." So the vain flycatcher even today sports a black head and only two ribbons in its tail.

But, I thought, it hadn't seemed to have learned much about being humble, behaving as though it were too beautiful to let me photograph it. Funnily, in the end, its vanity itself gave me the chance to do so! After a sharp rainstorm, the sun came out and the bird got busy preening itself. It was so involved in cleaning out its feathers that I was able to creep up close and take my pictures. Actually, of course, preening is important for reasons other than only looking pretty. A bird's feathers have to be in top condition if it is to fly properly — and its very life depends on its ability to fly.

I suspected that the birds had nested somewhere in this garden a month or two before we had arrived for our holiday — perhaps in May. Probably they had chosen a tree near the stream that ran along the bottom of the garden because they like nesting near water. While courting the female, the male flutters slowly up from a perch and flies round and round in wavy loops, his lovely tail curling behind him in the way those rhythmic dancers swirl their ribbons.

I've seen paradise flycatchers on the Ridge near my house in Delhi — usually during the monsoons — but they seem to be quite put off by the city. They stay hidden in the foliage uttering harsh 'chwe! chwechwe!' calls as they flit restlessly about from branch to branch. Also, the males usually do not wear their tail ribbons; probably these feathers are dropped after the breeding season and grown afresh.

Paradise flycatchers travel quite a bit within the country and no one is very sure about their movements. They like gardens and groves, wooded areas and forest clearings and remain up in the trees. And yes, they do eat flies — as well as other winged insects caught in flight. Their nest is neat, cone-shaped, made of fibre, rootlets, grass and cobweb.

P.S. The JAPANESE PARADISE FLYCATCHER is very similar, but glossy blue black all over. Did he, I wonder, do something much worse than merely boasting while awaiting entry into the Garden of Eden so that god turned him completely black? Or do the people who make up these stories (not me! not me!) think that god only likes white and not black? It would be interesting to write this story in a different way. Suppose the little rufous flycatcher who arrived at the the Garden of Eden found it full of beautiful black birds . . . and that he wanted to be like them. So he approached the guardian angel and . . . well you can carry on from here!

PARADISE FLYCATCHERS found all over India **NEST** March-August **LAY** 3-4 eggs **BOTH PARENTS** rear the chicks

Dusky mountain songster

There was a streaked laughing thrush,
Who sang in the garden so lush,
A song so enthralling,
When the rain did stop falling,
We listened to him in a hush.



At last the drumming roar of the rain on the hotel's roof lessened in volume. Suddenly it was gone and now there was only the tinkling plinkplonk of the rain dripping off the drenched foliage and the soft gurgle of water in the drains.

And then silence. Pure, blissful silence. It seemed as though the whole mountainside was waiting — holding its breath with expectation. Like a theatre curtain parting, the great soft clouds moved away.

'Trit-tew-teewit! Trit-it-it-it-cheweeeah!' The clear musical whistle broke the silence and cast an enchanting spell over the mountainside. 'Pity-wee, titty-titty-we are!'

This was followed by such an amazing variety of calls and whistles that it seemed as though an entire orchestra of birds was whistling outside. But no — for out there on the railing at the edge of the garden was the lone songster responsible. A greyish rufous bird, about the size of a myna with dark expressive eyes. Its greyish head was finely streaked in dark brown, its rusty body streaked in ivory white making it look as though it were wearing thin corduroy. It was the **STREAKED LAUGHING THRUSH**, a common resident of Kasauli (in Himachal Pradesh) and a great favourite of mine. It had a rusty patch behind its ear which made it look as though it had dabbed on a bit of dark rouge before coming out into the garden to perform. Actually, it was just reclaiming its territory after the rainstorm.

The hotel garden and the tangled cliff beyond it belonged to this dusky songster and his wife. I knew they had a nest in the tangled bushes behind the hotel for I had seen them take fat green caterpillars there after having caught them in the undergrowth. Often, they would hop down onto the grass and politely pick off a moth or grasshopper almost right off your shoes: they had perhaps four hungry chicks to feed and you didn't,

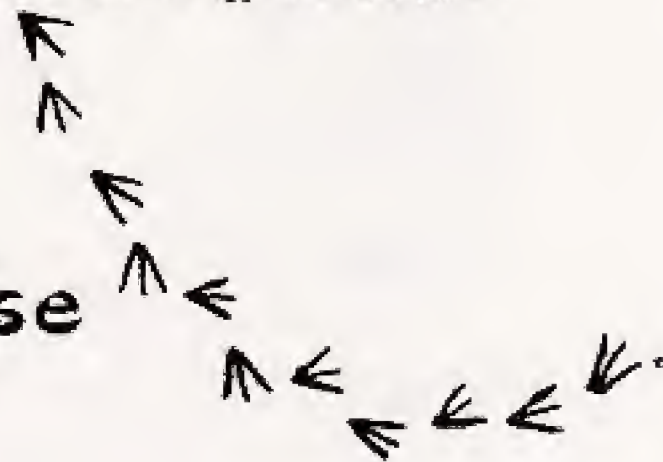


they seemed to be telling you by the expression on their faces. They reminded me a lot of babblers (*see page 25*) because they flew in the same weak and out-of-control manner and, sure enough, I discovered that they were indeed related to them.

Kasauli was full of streaked laughing thrushes — they lurked in groups of six or seven in the lush green undergrowth, keeping in touch with one another with a squeaky ‘chittr, chicker-chickerwitty-kitty-wee’ and scuttled about from bush to bush like mice.

STREAKED LAUGHING THRUSHES found in the Himalayas **NEST** March-September **LAY** 3-4 eggs **BOTH PARENTS** rear the chicks

Exotic mountain surprise



redbilled leiothrix

The leiothrix has a big name,
But is tiny enough all the same,
It will canoodle and cuddle,
And get in a huddle,
And certainly enjoys this sweet game.

When you first arrive at a place you haven't been to before — especially if it is a hill-station and especially if you are a birdwatcher — you are all keyed up with excitement and expectation. The hills and mountains, everyone knows, are full of the most colourful, dazzling, fabulous birds, many of who sing beautifully too.

So, when we arrived at Kasauli on our first visit, I was all agog. I thought that after our horrendous drive up from Delhi we fully deserved to see something beautiful and exotic in order to make us feel properly welcome. I settled into a chair in the verandah of our hotel which overlooked a small, unkempt garden and pine-forested valley. Clouds wafted above and the breeze was deliciously cool and refreshing.

All that was required, I thought, was for some exotic mountain bird to make its appearance. By the way, just what were those two little things cuddling together on the telegraph wires down there . . . ? I raised the binoculars. And promptly nearly dropped

them! Exotic mountain birds were right in front of me! They were about the size of sparrows, and overall, olive brown in colour. But . . . but . . . they had a bright, flame yellow flare on their breasts, tinged with scarlet, and black wings lined with scarlet and yellow, and a brilliant scarlet bill. I searched through the pages of Salim Ali's book, *Indian Hill Birds*, and soon identified the pair. They were **REDBILLED LEIOTHRIXES**, also called **PEKIN ROBINS**, and were members of the great babbler family.

Kasauli, I soon discovered, was full of them. There was one fellow who came whistling down the hillside at 5.30 every morning as he and his wife hunted insects in the lush foliage. In the early morning silence of the hill-station, his song — which was like that of a redwhiskered bulbul's but more elaborate — sounded lovely: a bold cheerful warbling that lifted your spirits and made you happy. This little fellow, along with his wife, would visit the garden regularly every morning, on their way down the hillside.

On a subsequent visit to Kasauli, a few years later, I discovered, to my delight, a pair of leiothrixes nesting in the tangled thickets right behind the hotel — in fact right behind my room. They kept dashing in and out of the thicket, and peer though I did (from a distance), I never did spot the nest, which is a cup made of leaves, mosses and lichens. They had built it somewhere, right in the very heart of the thicket, well hidden from prying eyes.

They were, however, extremely possessive of the garden and its nearby surroundings. If another pair of leiothrixes dared to come anywhere near the garden, the resident pair would whizz out at them from the thicket like missiles and drive them away, scolding indignantly. They sounded a bit like quarrelling sparrows, except that they were not quite as shrill. Amongst themselves, however, they were charming and affectionate. On several occasions, I came across pairs cuddling and canoodling deep within the bamboo thickets. Redbilled leiothrixes live in the Himalayas and eat seeds, berries and insects. They breed during the summer and monsoons. When not busy nesting, they hang around in gangs of four or six, along with other members of the great babbler family. Unfortunately, they are popular pet birds and so are caught in large numbers.

REDBILLED LEIOTHRIXES found in the Himalayas **NEST** April-October **LAY** 3-4 eggs **BOTH PARENTS** rear the chicks



Ambush at the swimming pool

The shikra has fierce yellow eyes,
And a shrill and challenging cry.
This small plucky raptor,
Small birds it does capture,
But really this hawk is quite shy.



Midsummer in Goa can be hot, very hot. So, from the bed of yellow cannas, the frog peered longingly at the inviting blue waters of the swimming pool just a few hops away. At last there was no one in the pool. Wearing nothing but a big foolish grin on its face — this was Goa, man! — the frog set off. In a few seconds it would be enjoying the cool, sparkling water and showing off its fabulous breaststroke.

High up in the mango tree at the edge of the compound, the SHIKRA bobbed its head and blinked its golden eyes fiercely. The small brownish grey hawk, with its rusty weave pattern on its breast, had glimpsed a movement near the swimming pool, far below. Eyes blazing, claws extended, it swooped. And in the blink of an eye, both hawk and frog had gone! It was the perfect ambush by one of my all-time favourite birds.

For a raptor, or a bird of prey, you may think the shikra is small because it's only about the size of a pigeon. But what it lacks in size it makes up for with pluck and guts. It will glare at you unafraid out of orange or golden yellow eyes and will nearly always spot you before you spot it. When its shrill, challenging 'titu! titu!' call rings out in parks and wooded areas, other birds and small animals become nervous and jumpy. They know the shikra may come swooping down any second like some deadly missile and have them for lunch. The shikra's short, round-edged wings help it to twist and turn speedily between trees as it pursues its victim. On many occasions I have come across feathers of a kill (usually a dove) scattered under a tree. Shikras have been trained to hunt quails, partridges and even young peafowl which are much larger than it, though this is now illegal.

The shikra sometimes perches on the posts in the cemetery wall. It looks around for a while, causing panic amongst the other birds, before flying off. It flies swiftly, with rapid

blurring wingbeats followed by a snaking glide; sometimes it likes to soar and circle high in the sky.

Shikras nest up in leafy trees like mango and tamarind during summer. Young shikras have dark vertical streaks on their whitish breasts. As in most raptors, the female is larger than the male.

SHIKRA found all over India **NEST** March-June **LAY** 3-4 eggs **BOTH PARENTS** feed the chicks



crested serpent eagle

The fall of an eagle

An eagle that lived by a lake,
Hunted down and ate many snakes.
I offered him oodles
Of two-minute noodles,
But they gave him a bad tummy ache!

When I turned into the driveway in front of the house on a hot summer afternoon, an astonishing spectacle greeted my eyes. Crows flew about everywhere, cawing hoarsely, and the driveway was full of the monkeys that lived next door in the cemetery. They were bristling with anger and making darting grabs at something that hopped and fluttered at the bottom of the hedge. Big brown and white feathers lay scattered all over the road.

I armed myself with a stick — to ward off the monkeys — and a sack and approached the big fluttering bundle of feathers on the road. Another juvenile kite, I thought, that had fallen out of its nest. But when I got close I realised this was no kite. It was a large, dark brown bird, with a beautiful, delicately streaked pattern on its breast, and angry golden eyes. It seemed to have a small, rounded, black and white ruff around its head and was armed with a fearsome hooked bill. It was a **CRESTED SERPENT EAGLE**.

It was badly injured. Most of its tail feathers had been pulled out and one leg dangled uselessly. I bundled it into the sack and took it home as the monkeys coughed and grunted angrily. I knew I would not be able to keep the bird at home because my boxer Chops — the dog I had then — would get after it. So I called up a friend who arrived



promptly and took the eagle off to the famous Jain Bird Hospital in Chandni Chowk. They treated its injuries but would not keep it as a patient as they only admitted birds that were vegetarian. My friend took it home and told me that it remained in a fighting mood right up to the time it died — sadly — four days later.

I never discovered how that eagle had been caught by the monkeys but I was happy that such a magnificent bird could be seen right outside my window. And then, a few years later, in September, I heard the crows make an almighty racket once again. High up on the tamarind tree in the cemetery was another crested serpent eagle and this fellow was really magnificent. Its great roundish black and white crest flared open angrily as the crows tried to mob it and its huge hooked bill gaped open warningly. Eventually it flew off with slow, heavy wingbeats and I could see clearly the broad white band under its big rounded wings and tail.

Amazingly, in October the following year, the crested serpent eagle turned up again on the tamarind tree, and I now believe that the birds probably nest in a wooded area somewhere nearby and, at this time of the year, pass through the cemetery on their way perhaps to a better hunting ground.

The crested serpent eagle is not a particularly shy bird and may be seen in wooded country perched bolt upright on the top of a tree, half-hidden by the leaves, so that it can pounce unseen on its prey. And yes, it does eat serpents as well as lizards, rats, mice, frogs, eels, and sick or injured birds. It builds a huge untidy nest out of twigs and sticks.

I still have a couple of the big brown and white feathers of the fallen eagle as a memento, and every year, in September and October, keep an ear open for the hoarse cawing of crows which will tell me that the eagle has come visiting again.

CRESTED SERPENT EAGLES found all over India **NEST** December-March **LAY** 1 egg **BOTH PARENTS** rear the chick



The barn owls of Qudsia Gardens

The barn owls that lived in the park,
Only came out when it was all dark.
These birds of great mystery,
Had a terrible history,
And have vanished and left not a mark.



barn owl

I was having my tea one afternoon in the dining room when I heard a soft, muffled 'whump!' from the window. Outside, on the ground, sandwiched between the window and the hedge was a truly beautiful owl looking in exactly as though it were expecting me to invite it in for tea. (No, I was not having mouse sandwiches!) It was about the size of a crow, a gorgeous mushroom gold in colour, finely streaked in black. Its heart-shaped face was framed by a ruffle of creamy white feathers and it stared placidly at me out of slanting golden brown eyes. It was a young BARN OWL and I thought I knew what it was doing here, outside my window, on this warm summer afternoon.

Across the road from my house is an ancient historic park called Qudsia Gardens. It was laid out by Qudsia Begum, a Mughal empress, several hundred years ago. At that time, the park also had a palace, a mosque, a pavilion overlooking the river Yamuna which flowed alongside, and several impressive gateways. Exactly the sort of structures in which barn owls like to nest.

As the years and centuries went by, their descendants would have seen all the changes and developments taking place in their park. Some must have watched the last king of Delhi, Bahadur Shah Zafar, take his airings here on the back of his caparisoned elephant. Others would have seen the palace and pavilion crumble with age and neglect. Some would have been alarmed when the British cut all the orange trees in the park in order to make space for the cannons with which they would bombard old Delhi during the great rebellion of 1857. Another generation would have been terribly disturbed when a large portion of the park was turned into a road and a noisy bus terminal. Eventually, only the mosque and one ancient gateway remained, as well as some huge, ancient peepul and banyan trees. But still, it was enough, and the saga of the barn owls continued. For this garden had become their traditional, ancestral home.



Until one day, a few years ago, the authorities decided to install a huge musical fountain in the park. Around the area where it was built, they installed bright yellow sodium vapour lamps, which was strange, really, because they never seemed to be bothered about the fact that the street lights on the road outside rarely worked. Anyway, there was such a lot of noise and disturbance even at night that the owl family decided to move and find another home. Now, one of them had flown across the road and into our complex, seeking shelter. Probably chased by crows and babblers, it had 'whumped' down into the small space between the dining room window and the hedge for a rest. But alas, by the time I had fetched the camera, it had gone and I never saw it again.

Of course, this might not be the exact story of the barn owls of Qudsia Gardens, but I like to think that it probably is quite near the truth. I know that barn owls have nested in the gardens for many years and they did indeed disappear when that ugly fountain was built.

Early this spring, my friend who walks in the gardens every morning told me the family of barn owls had returned. I guess it is not easy to leave a place that has been home to your family for many hundreds of years. And perhaps the ghastly fountain had broken down and was no longer causing a disturbance. Anyway, we set off early one morning to check out the gnarled old dead tree in which the owls had made their home. We were immediately rewarded by an enchanting sight. The two adult owls, looking white and ghostly in the dim, pre-dawn light, were sitting at the entrance to their hollow, kissing each other very lovingly. At first I thought, what a wonderful way to begin a new day, but then realised that the owls were probably kissing each other goodnight because in a few minutes the sun would rise and they would retire to slumber in their hollow!

But where was the rest of the family? As we moved around the tree (keeping our distance from it of course), another amazing sight greeted us. There was another entrance to the owls' hollow — the nursery entrance you could say — and here, sitting virtually one on top of another, were three young woolly-looking owls doing complicated exercises with their heads and necks. They looked exactly as though they were practising for a bharatanatyam dance recital. This continued till the sun came up. Then the parent owls stopped kissing each other and withdrew into their hollow, and two of the juveniles soon followed. The third juvenile hopped across to its parents' entrance and sat here facing the rising sun like a meditating Buddha.

A few weeks later, I was told by my friend that tragedy had befallen the loving owl family. At least one of the chicks had probably fallen out of the hollow and been taken by stray dogs. He also caught some small boys throwing stones at the hollow and saw a

shady- looking character hanging around suspiciously. After which the family disappeared. I like to think that two of the surviving youngsters have simply flown away to find a new home while the adults might have shifted somewhere nearby temporarily, until the small boys forget about them. But I know that the truth can be sadder than that. Ignorant and superstitious people believe that various parts of the owl's body can cure various diseases and the shady character in the garden might have been trying to catch the owls for that purpose.

I feel quite sorry for the owls. Other birds appear to hate them and will mob them on sight, which is why they are forced to hunt after dark. Many people believe that owls bring bad luck — and then go and kill them to make 'medicines' that don't cure anything. In return, owls hunt mice and rats which eat huge amounts of our stocks of grain. We really are ungrateful to them. Barn owls nest in tree hollows, old crumbling buildings, disused wells, ancient fortresses and such structures.

BARN OWLS found all over India **NEST** throughout the year **LAY** 4-7 smooth round white eggs **BOTH PARENTS** rear the chicks



Keeping watch from the headless palm

The owlet sat on the tall palm,
So still and ever so calm,
That the foolish little mouse
Ran out of his house
And into a great deal of harm!

Walking back home at dusk, one violet evening in Goa, I casually glanced at a tall, solitary, headless coconut palm standing ramrod straight in the middle of a field. Poor tree, I thought, it looked so bare and ridiculous: its great rustling crown of fronds had been chopped right off. But wait! There was something squat and tubby perched on top of the tree. Through the binoculars I saw that it was a **SPOTTED OWLET** and it looked as though it had simply grown there! From this vantage point it would keep watch and



pounce on small animals and insects. I saw it on its headless palm several more times and I think it spent the night on the tree-top.

If you want to see a spotted owlet close up, just walk up to any huge and ancient neem or peepul or banyan tree and knock smartly on the trunk several times. ('Knock knock.' 'Who's there?' 'Ull!' 'Ull who?' 'Ulloo!') You might find a little round brown head, dusted with white, icing-sugar spots, staring down at you out of round golden eyes, from a hole or hollow in the trunk.



spotted owlet

The spotted owlet is a grey brown, squat little owl, about the size of a myna and has the enchanting habit of bobbing its head up and down and side to side while looking at you. Like other owls, it can screw its head right round and bob it while staring at you over its shoulder. And the family of spotted owlets that I met in a cracked up old mango tree just outside the house in Goa also appeared to have large Santa Claus-like moustaches (though no beards). The ones I see in Delhi don't appear to have such bushy moustaches, which is a pity. I see them often in the neem trees in the cemetery and on one overcast morning, one fellow even came and sat on the bottlebrush tree in the garden. Occasionally I've seen two or three of them cuddled fatly together on a branch, dozing blissfully.

Like other owls, spotted owlets have to be careful that they aren't seen by other birds like crows and babblers who will make life hell for them. But, as the dusk settles, they get ready for the night's hunting harshly screeching, 'churr-churr-churr-cheevah-cheevah!' as they sort out their hunting territories for the nights. Some like to perch on street lamps where they have an easy time picking off the moths and beetles attracted to the light. Spotted owlets nest in tree hollows and holes in crumbling walls.

SPOTTED OWLETS found all over India **NEST** November-April **LAY** 3-4 white eggs **BOTH PARENTS** bring up the young

Stratocruisers in danger

When you're dead it'll come down to munch ya,
That unpopular bird, the vulture,
But it keeps clean as a whistle,
After tearing the gristle,
Because it's a bird of great culture!

Many years ago in Mumbai, I used to go up to the terrace of our building to watch the vultures float over the city on broad majestic wings, like squadrons of silent stratocruiser bombers heading out to hit the enemy. Of course, they were really only looking out for a dead animal — perhaps another poor stray dog that had been run over on the streets.

Most people hate and fear vultures, but there's really no need to do so. Though they may appear to be ugly and filthy, vultures are really amongst the cleanest of all birds. One famous naturalist who kept a vulture as a pet said it was the cleanest bird he had ever kept, and it bathed and preened with great care.

Vultures have to be clean because of what they eat — if they did not clean up properly after a meal, they would run the risk of falling ill through infection from the rotting meat and gore all over their feathers.

Also, they help us to keep our own surroundings clean. Imagine there's a dead buffalo on the road outside your house. It starts smelling and bloats up like a balloon, attracting flies by the zillion. No one comes to take it away, despite your making numerous phone calls to the people in charge at the municipality. Then, high up, a vulture spots the dead animal using its high-powered binocular vision. It banks and circles and soon comes swooping down to land with a hop and skip and jump. Its friends follow it, and soon there are perhaps 200 of the huge birds squabbling and prancing over the dead animal like great grey ghouls. And within 20 minutes or so, all that is left of the buffalo is skin and sparkling bone, which is not too difficult to clean up.

Actually, there's only one problem with the scene I've described above. It is not at all likely that 200 vultures will come swooping out of the sky to clean up the buffalo, because the number of vultures all over the country has fallen sharply in the last few



years. There are just not very many vultures left any more. Some scientists say that the birds have died due to disease; others say the excessive use of pesticides and poisoning of carcasses by us has caused the calamity. We still need the scavenging services of the vultures very badly. Suppose, for example, there is a drought or flood or some deadly infectious disease that causes many many domestic animals to perish. Who will take care of their rotting carcasses (and thereby prevent diseases from spreading) if not vultures? It has been suggested that we set up vulture 'restaurants' or feeding stations in particular localities where the birds would be fed every day. These vulture 'restaurants' would best be located in or near sanctuaries or national parks, and certainly very very far away from airports because of all birds, vultures get hit by aircraft most often and cause expensive and dangerous damage.

I often used to see large numbers of vultures sitting hunched around our colossal water tank tower in Delhi, like a collection of witches mumbling over dry spells. And I used to think, "By God! We're in for a hot, dry, waterless summer because the vultures are already gathering!" Actually, the birds were just waiting for the thermals to develop and carry them aloft into the skies. Thermals are like huge bubbles of hot air that rise from the ground as it gets heated up during the course of the day. If you are a big and heavy bird like a vulture, they can be essential to give you a lift high up into the sky. Once up there, all you have to do is glide on your big, broad wings, from one thermal to the next.

The vultures that gathered around the water tank were mainly **WHITEBACKED VULTURES** (now known as **WHITERUMPED VULTURES**): huge iron grey birds, with a dirty white patch



whitebacked vultures

on their backs and a broad whitish band under their wings. Sometimes they would be accompanied by a smaller, white, kite-like vulture with a bare yellow face and yellow bill. This was the **INDIAN SCAVENGER VULTURE**, also known as the **EGYPTIAN VULTURE**.

During the evenings the vultures would come gliding down at great speed to roost on the huge peepul and banyan trees in the Qudsia Gardens next door. Once, a bird completely misjudged its flight path and crashed straight through the plate glass window of a neighbour's house. Though terrified and bleeding, it was not seriously hurt and soon recovered from its shock and flew off.

Whitebacked vultures build huge, untidy, twiggy nests on the tops of large banyan and tamarind and similar trees. Egyptian vultures build their nest — a large, untidy mass of twigs, rags and rubbish — on rocky ledges, the corners of crumbling forts and ruins or on tops of tall trees.

WHITEBACKED VULTURES found all over India **NEST** October-March **LAY** 1 egg **BOTH PARENTS** rear the chick
EGYPTIAN VULTURES found all over India except in the north-east **NEST** February-April **LAY** 2 eggs **BOTH PARENTS** rear the chicks



Last look from the window

Several interesting birdy developments have taken place outside my window during the course of writing this book. And I'm happy to report that it's mostly good news:

Best of all perhaps is the news that the barn owls are back in their gnarled old tree in Qudsia Gardens. Well, at least one of them is, and I'm hopeful that there will soon be a family there which will continue with their grand ancient tradition. I've been visiting it occasionally, early in the morning, and am hoping that it will soon accept me as a friend. At the moment it is rather photo-shy and ducks out of sight when it spots the camera. Otherwise, it seems quite content to sit outside its hollow and gravely watch the early morning walkers in the gardens, until such time that the crows and jungle babblers arrive and begin gheraoing it rudely.

Yet another sparrow fledgling has flown from one of the balcony nests and I was lucky enough to be on hand to see its very first flight. It perched nervously on the railings outside the balcony (for the clothesline) and fluttered up to the very edge and back again several times, as it tried to summon up the courage to fly. Its father hopped around nearby, chirruping encouragement. At last, the little bird took the plunge and flew (very well I thought) straight down into the bushes at the base of the wall which separates the cemetery from our complex. I guess it would have managed fine after that.

I've had visitors too. One cloudy morning there was a rollicking hullabaloo in the bottlebrush tree. The cause? A pair of rakish, wild-eyed koels. I think the male was trying to convince the female that he was the only guy for her. He hadn't got very far when another slinky fellow flew into the tree to challenge him, and the poor female, sensing trouble perhaps, flew off hurriedly. The two males glared at each other out of their staring crimson eyes and began a 'tu-tu-main-main' routine at the tops of their voices. First one bird would yell and yodel, then the other would reply, and both would shuffle a little bit closer to each other, until quite literally, they were eyeballing one another. Eventually, however, the interloper flew off first though, by this time, the female had long gone!

Then, over a period of several afternoons, a young shikra began hunting along the bushes and trees next to the cemetery wall. I had heard it on several occasions and suddenly one afternoon it appeared on the 'mitha neem' outside the window. I was lucky because I had had the camera mounted and ready on the tripod but even so, could only snap off three pictures before it flew off. I saw it again several times and once it really surprised me. I was watching a garden lizard on the same 'mitha neem': it had crawled to the very end of a thin branch and then, much to my amazement, had taken a flying leap off the twig to land on the hedge below. (I suppose this is how some lizards became flying lizards!) Anyway, it was waddling along the top of the hedge when suddenly the shikra pounced from the neem tree where it had been keeping watch. But it must have been too slow and clumsy (being young perhaps) because the lizard managed to dive safely into the depths of the hedge.

For a few days I noticed a collared dove flying into the bottlebrush tree with flimsy twigs in its beak. I couldn't see the exact site of the nest because it was obscured by a clump of leaves. I don't think the dove found this a suitable site because activity stopped after a few days. But who knows? Perhaps it had begun incubating and was sitting snug and quiet on its eggs! I don't think this happened because I would have, by now, surely spotted the chicks as they tried to fly, or one of them would have surely fallen out of its nest and asked to be rescued! So probably the nest was abandoned, though I continue to keep an eye on the site!

Finally, there was the little spotted owlet who came and spent the day on the 'mitha neem'. I noticed it sitting there at about 11.30 one morning. It was one dozy little owl because — apart from examining me curiously when I went up close — it didn't seem at all bothered by my presence or that of the vegetable vendor who parked his cycle under the tree and yelled in his stentorian voice, 'Baingan-aaloo-gobi-mattar-bhinde-layyyyyy!!!' It simply stretched, preened, scratched itself, yawned and settled down to snooze. Unfortunately it was a gloomy glowering monsoon day, so the light wasn't very good for photography. Even so, I shot off a number of pictures. The little fellow remained on its perch till just past seven in the evening when it began raining heavily. I was hoping it would sleep over (and would have even offered it an umbrella) but well, maybe next time . . .

P.S. Sorry, but the barn owl story has a sad ending after all. The Delhi Metro (underground railway) people have invaded a part of the Qudsia Gardens to dig their tunnels and have created havoc in the peaceful park, cutting down trees and bushes. The barn owls naturally have left for quieter places.



A hoopoe once told her sweet laddie,
"I hope that you will now be happy,
For your daddy and me
Have decided you see,
To never ever change your nappy!"

*Meet baby stinkbomber hoopoes, jealous squabbling sparrows, dive-bombing kites,
glowing glittering sunbirds, lonely crested serpent eagles,
and many other exotic birds . . .*

In big, noisy cities?

Yes, in big noisy cities!

BIRDS FROM MY WINDOW is a bird book unlike any other.

Written in a light, conversational style, it takes an affectionate look at over 50 species of birds through limericks, black and white sketches, easy-reference information at the end of each chapter, and text based on anecdotes and Ranjit Lal's own observations. Photographs on the endpaper offer a ready colour guide to the birds.

Guaranteed the next time you hear a bird call, you will not rest until you have identified it . . .

Ranjit Lal has been watching, listening to, and writing about birds from his window for many years, and maintains that this is one of the best ways in which to observe (and enjoy) what birds get up to in their daily lives. Also, he says, it's comfortable: you can enjoy your cup of tea while watching mynas and sparrows conduct vociferous wrestling bouts in the balcony, or ethereal paradise flycatchers fly to and fro showing off their beautiful tails.

This is Ranjit Lal's second book published with Tulika. The first was an adventure story, *That Summer at Kalagarh*.

On the cover is a HOPOE, photographed by Ranjit Lal.



ISBN 81-86895-64-7

Rs 100.00